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No. 26

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY REVIEW



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CONTENTS

Impulse: Editorial by Doug Fratz	4
Pitching Pennies at the Starboard Bulkhead: "Nebula Wars: The Importance of Being More Than Earnest" by Michael Bishop...5	
From The Pictured Urn: "A Rectangle for Leibowitz, Or Please Put Me in the Upper Right Corner" by Charles Sheffield	12
The Darkness of Power: A Conversation With Stephen R. Donaldson by Nancy Kress and Paul Ferguson	15
News From the Ghetto: "The Insanity Offense" by Charles Platt	19
Essaying: "STARDATE" by David Bischoff	21
Words & Pictures: Movie Reviews by Darrell Schweitzer	23
Reviews: Books, Etc. by Doug Fratz, Eugene Lin, Stephen P. Brown, Mark J. McGarry, Ardath Mayhar, Debra L. McBride, and Dan Crawford	26
Counter-Thrusts: Letters by Alan Dean Foster, Gregory Benford, Robert Silverberg, Parke Godwin, Paul Cook, Kim Gibbs, Randi Bird, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, and Darrell Schweitzer.....	31

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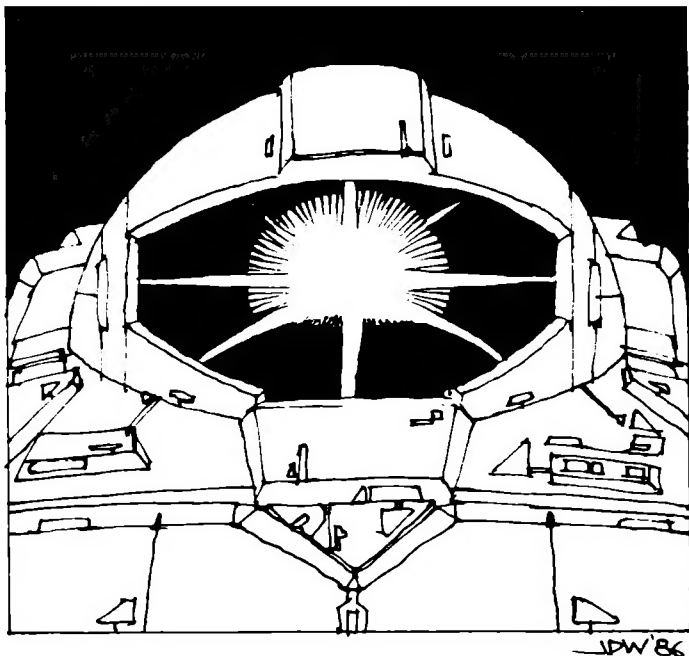
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ARTWORK

Bob Eggleton	Cover
Alfred D. Klosterman ..	12,26
John D. Waltrip	4
Mike Romesburg	5
David Transue	21
Derek Parks-Carter	19
William Rotsler	31
Allen Koszowski	23

ADVERTISING

Baen Books	2
Writers of the Future	18
Fandom Directory.....	24
Thrust Publications	25
MacLay & Associates.....	33
Unclassified Advertisements	34
DAW Books	35
Tor Books	36



IMPULSE

editorial by Doug Fratz

Welcome to the first quarterly issue of THRUST. We have a big year planned for 1987.

The Issue At Hand: THRUST 26 begins with Michael Bishop, who confidently marches in where angels fear to tread, taking a look at the current controversy centering around John Shirley, Orson Scott Card, and the Nebula Awards. THRUST readers who do not happen to be active members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) may be unaware of this brouhaha, which has been occurring primarily in the SFWA FORUM. Mike's even-handed views will, I believe, shed more light than heat on this knotty dispute.

Charles Sheffield returns after a long absence from these pages, partially caused by his term as president of SFWA. Charles has decided to apply his analytical acumen to the literary realm, introducing the soon-to-be-famous Sheffield Diagram for classifying SF authors. And he's asking THRUST's fearless readers to send in their classifications of hundreds of current authors, while timorously refusing to promulgate his own. (Charles' tenure as SFWA president has caused him to foster political tendencies.)

Our interview this issue is with Stephen R. Donaldson, best known for his Thomas Covenant series, which immediately established him as a best-selling fantasy author when the initial trilogy appeared in 1977. The interview is in the form of a conversation between Donaldson, fantasy author Nancy Kress, and Paul Ferguson of the State University of New York at Brockport, where Donaldson was a guest of the Brockport Writers Forum.

Charles Platt is back again with some thoughts on libel as it applies to critical commentary, based on the recently concluded

lawsuit brought by comic book artist and writer Michael Fleicher against Harlan Ellison and Gary Groth, publisher of THE COMICS JOURNAL (which may be THRUST's closest counterpart in the comics field). The science fiction field itself has been fortunate to have avoided libel suits of this nature, but the Fleicher/Ellison/Groth situation should force all of us involved in commentary on the SF field to carefully consider where legitimate criticism may end and libel may begin.

David Bischoff also returns to THRUST after a several-year hiatus to relate the woeful story of STARDATE, the short-lived SF magazine on which he and Ted White lavished their hopes and efforts for many joyous and frustrating months. (New THRUST editors Steve Brown and Heather Bryden were also working for STARDATE when it folded, and even I got involved, in the form of an article reviewing some of the hard SF of 1985, which never was printed.) The history of SF is littered with SF magazines that died young, but seldom do we get the full inside story of what happened.

Darrell Schweitzer again looks at Hollywood's latest sci-fi offerings, and finds little of redeeming social value. He also finds more quantity than quality in recent TV SF&F. (And since Darrell wrote this column, I understand that the new *Twilight Zone*, one of the few bright spots, has been cancelled by CBS.)

Beginning with this issue, we have begun a major effort to make our book review section more comprehensive in coverage, and provide more in-depth analyses of important books. Editors Steve Brown and Eugene Lin are working closely with me to help make this section of THRUST one of its most interesting and valuable.

Our letters column has begun to pick up steam, as evidenced by this issue's flurry of comments. Letter writers beware, though:

With our new quarterly schedule, comments must be sent in promptly. Next issue will appear June 1, and letters must be received before April 15!

Ghost Report: Since finding out last issue about the tortuous publishing history of Piers Anthony's *Ghost* (Tor, 1986) and the role that THRUST may have played in it, I became determined to read the novel. I had hoped to be able to report to you that *Ghost* is a worthy, innovative novel which took 10 years to get published due to conservative editorial attitudes. But what I found was an ambitious but critically flawed novel, with some excellent ideas at its heart.

The book begins in an energy-poor future, quite original in conception, but highly '60s-ish in its style and sensibilities. The main plot involves a space-time voyage to the ends of the known universe, where they find that entropy has led to matter losing touch with the physical universe and becoming tangible only to the psi-forces of the mind. This is a very original concept, laden with thematic potential, as the hard SF narrative evolves into a fantasy milieu of psi-matter. Unfortunately, Anthony's hard SF sections never come close to achieving the hard science verisimilitude needed to contrast the drift into fantasy. It's an interesting book, but one that falls frustratingly far short of its potential.

The Bigger They Are: Several have asked whether THRUST will become larger as well as more frequent. The answer is yes. Although this issue is the same size as other recent issues, future issues of THRUST should feature more pages. The deciding factor is advertising; I force myself to stick to a strict page-count formula (for economic reasons), with the sole variable being pages of paid advertising. Roughly speaking, for each new page of advertising, I can add two pages to THRUST.

I might note that THRUST already compares quite favorably with other semi-prozines in the field. THRUST 25 contained 30 pages editorial matter and 6 pages advertising. A recent issue of FANTASY REVIEW had more non-advertising pages (42), but at a higher price. The latest issue of SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE had only 29 non-advertising pages, out of 54 total pages, and the latest LOCUS had only 25 non-advertising pages, out of 52 total pages! And in the case of all three, most of the editorial material is non-paid news or listings. THRUST consists primarily of paid material. In fact, there is a good chance that THRUST will publish more paid material in 1987 than any other semi-prozine.

Coming Attractions: Next issue will include: Michael Bishop with a salute to underrated author Pamela Sargent; John Shirley, taking on today's science fiction conventions; Marvin Kaye with part 4 of his series on immortality; Gregory Benford, making his very first appearance in THRUST (not counting the interview in THRUST 18) with a look at the contributions of Fred Hoyle to the evolution of modern hard science fiction; an interview with Greg Bear; and (surprise!) the debut column of THRUST's newest regular columnist, Richard E. Gels, former long-time editor of SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW! □



Mike Remsburg

MICHAEL BISHOP

Nebula Wars:

The Importance of Being More Than Earnest

I. Background on a Controversy

In Orson Scott Card's best novel to date, *Speaker for the Dead* (Tor, 1986), Quim, the

son of the xenobiologist, Novinha, earnestly remarks, "This is a serious confrontation between good and evil." To which Novinha replies, "Everything is... It's figuring out which is which that takes so much work." (page 211).

Recently, certain members of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) have been arguing about the appropriateness of the 1985 Nebula Award given to Card's novel

Ender's Game and bickering over the fact that his **Speaker for the Dead** leads its closest competitor for the 1986 award for the best novel, Gene Wolfe's **Free Live Free**, by nineteen recommendations, 47 to 28. (I am writing this at the tag end of December, with a copy of the latest issue of NEBULA AWARDS REPORT, edited by Card, in my lap.) Apparently, grousing about the victory of **Ender's Game** and the unprecedented lead taken again this year by another Card title has been rife among the SFWA membership, albeit mostly limited to private talks and correspondances. Now, however, the whole issue has come to a head.

Although this may not be--in Quim's earnest phrasing--"a serious confrontation between good and evil," it promises a serious donnybrook between the grouseurs' notion of what is good for the SF field and Card's understandably impassioned defense not only of his Nebula but also of his integrity.

Good vs. evil? Good vs. good? Evil vs. evil? Or one set of well-meaning human beings vs. another such set, each advancing from positions hardened by separate but equal perceptions of outrage and righteous indignation?

Hang on. In my last column for THRUST, this: "I invariably get in trouble writing about the awards that SF people bestow on their favorite literary works." But, hell, let's live dangerously. This column will give you a safe vantage from which to watch me stagger through a field of land mines as I (1) review **Speaker for the Dead** by Card and **Eclipse** by John Shirley and (2) draw various disputable conclusions about the controversy in which these men are playing--whether willy-nilly or eagerly--beaverly--starring roles.

THRUST's regular readership will recognize John Shirley's name at once. He is the author of the novels **City Come A-Walkin'** and **Transmaniacon**, as well as many short stories. Last issue, he returned to these pages after an absence of ten numbers with a column bearing the provocative in-your-face title "Make It Scream" (next to which my "Pitching Pennies Against the Starboard Bulkhead" sounds like a doubtful insomnia cure for angst-ridden proles on a long interstellar voyage). If the title of his column failed to wake everybody up, Shirley compensated by rushing to indict Robert Silverberg, Gregory Benford, and certain unnamed members of the "old guard" as exemplars of--get ready to scream, all ye slavish idolators--"SF Cowardice!"

I mention Shirley's brash, self-serving iconoclasm because he is almost wholly to blame--or to cheer--for precipitating the current embarrassing wrangle over Card's novels and their steady accumulation of recommendations over these past two Nebula years. "Fools rush in where angels fear to go" (according to either John Milton or Nat King Cole), and Shirley has taken it upon himself to bring into the open all the craven grumbling--"vicious rumors" as Card has termed it--that Card himself acknowledges has caused him real emotional pain since **Ender's Game's** victory.

Shirley lobbed one of the first publicly audible grenades in a letter dated "10-1-86" to THE FORUM, "the private magazine of the Active Members of SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF AMERICA"--from which

"Permission to quote is expressly denied" unless one first obtains the okay of each involved contributor. Card replied to Shirley's explosive interpretation of the situation in a long letter dated "20 October 1986," also printed in FORUM 97, and the two men have given me permission to quote from their letters--judiciously, at least--for the purposes of this essay/review.

What is Shirley's explanation for the recommendation--eliciting power of Card's novels and stories? Basically, he has two points to make, first that neither **Ender's Game** nor **Speaker for the Dead** strikes him as of Nebula quality, and second that these works have probably drawn award recommendations for extraliterary reasons having to do with Card's "influence" as a critic of short fiction, his frequent recommendations of the stories of other writers, and his high visibility as both the editor of the NEBULA AWARDS REPORT and a member of the Nebula jury entrusted with the responsibility, or the privilege, of adding overlooked works of merit to the final ballot in each of the four traditional awards--novel, novella, novelet, and short story.

Further, Shirley characterizes Card as a "reactionary" reviewer (one who favors "straightforward stuff" in plain style over works by more progressive, literary writers), suggests that he withdraw **Speaker for the Dead** from consideration "because there are simply too many doubts about fairness here," and concludes with a lawyerly flourish, "it's ethically wrong to vote for Card this time." Why, my befuddled SFWA colleagues? Well, because a "vote for Card is a vote for campaigning."

It may be politic to note that early in these fireworks Shirley declares that "Card is not a bad fellow at all. He's intelligent, talented, and probably decent. I don't think he's doing anything against the rules." Later he concedes, "If Card is cultivating all this, the cultivating process is perhaps not something he's aware of." These concessions--rhetorical (conceivably sincere) sops to even-handedness--are ultimately tantamount to providing Card with a bullet-proof vest and then shooting him point-blank in the head. Brains everywhere. But who, given the gun's recoil, do they belong to, and what are we going to do now that they're splattered all over the SFWA clubhouse? Clean them up, I guess. Stuff them back into our fractured heads and swab the floor.

Card, recognizing that he has been bushwhacked, hollers. And hollers at length. Already, he has had to contend with the boorish behavior of a pique-afflicted colleague at the ceremony at which he received his trophy for **Ender's Game**; a paid advertisement by Norman Spinrad in the SFWA BULLETIN declaring that his colleagues have bestowed the Nebula "interchangeably" on "masterpieces, cult objects, and trivial ephemera"; the whispered innuendos of those as perturbed by **Ender's Game's** triumph as John Shirley; and the faintheartedness of SFWA members who have suddenly stopped submitting their own Nebula recs for fear that people will suppose them "cadging for an award." Shirley's attack--his willingness to commit himself to print--may have centered the whole affair for Card, but it also puts floatation devices on all his heretofore

submerged frustrations and hurts, and when he replies, he replies...well, with angry alacrity.

To wit: "On the basis of his conjecture, without a shred of evidence other than a 'consensus' among the people who agree with him, Shirley wishes to impose the death penalty on **Speaker for the Dead** and on my good name," responds Card. "I'm beginning to gain some understanding of what it feels like to be lynched."

He points out that he has never asked anyone to read a book of his, never asked anyone if they have read a book of his, never even engaged others in discussions of his work unless someone else first raises the issue and invites a reply. Campaigning? How? When? What campaigning? Every work that wins a Nebula wins "because a plurality--not a majority--of the voters liked it better than the other nominated works." Moreover, "every Nebula winner walks away from the award ceremony keenly aware that a majority of the voters preferred different works."

Card goes on to defend the Nebulas as a vital tool in drawing "favorable attention to a much-despised or much-ignored field of artistic endeavor," and he defends the recommendations process by arguing that "SFWA members who recommend works for the Nebula do it with the highest integrity." Later, he emphatically declares that "Nominating somebody for the Nebula means you thought they did a damn fine piece of writing. Period. Nothing more. It doesn't mean you're bucking for a Nebula yourself. It doesn't mean you're trying to seduce the author of the work you nominated." He argues that the rules do not permit an author to withdraw a work "except in favor of a specific future edition"; he implores the membership to disregard "Shirley's attempt to manipulate the Nebula process"; he asks--not unreasonably--that **Speaker for the Dead** be judged solely on its merits; and he encourages his colleagues to read John Shirley's **Eclipse** and to evaluate it on the same basis.

As already noted, Card's reply to Shirley is long. I've given a very selective synopsis of it. He also treats of several other matters--his reasons for staying on as the NEBULA AWARDS REPORT editor despite considering resigning in January 1985, his surprise at **Ender's Game's** steady accumulation of recommendations during the year, his concerns about the impact of his own recommendations on other writers, his prevailing attitude toward so-called schools or movements in the SF field, his speculations about why **Ender's Game** has provoked such controversy in the wake of its Nebula victory, and his belief that Shirley's attack on him and the awards process is similar "to the way McCarthy opposed 'communism' by attacking liberals for treason instead of engaging them in debate about their ideas." Along the way, he notes that Shirley "openly stands for a political and social point of view that I oppose" and that, given the community-oriented concerns of both **Ender's Game** and **Speaker for the Dead**, it would have shocked him to find that such a person "didn't hate" his work.

A couple of these matters warrant further consideration. For now, however, put them on hold. I recommended **Speaker** for a Nebula

shortly after reading Shirley's letter; indeed, his letter prompted me to read Card's book after I had peevishly decided not to. And I sent in my rec of Shirley's *Eclipse* on December 30, shortly after making up my mind to examine the whole controversy in this column. Herewith, then, honoring Card's request to judge both his novel and Shirley's solely on their literary/aesthetic credentials, my honest--undoubtedly idiosyncratic--reactions to each.

II. Two Scrupulously Fair Reviews *Speaker for the Dead* by Orson Scott Card (Tor Books, 1986, 415 pp., \$15.95)

This book, as already noted, impresses me as Card's best novel to date. Beside it, *Ender's Game*, which won its Nebula to my real chagrin and consternation, dwindles in stature to a set of awkward preliminary sketches for the more affectionately conceived, and so more thoughtful, *Speaker*. Indeed, Card admits that he wrote *Ender*, itself based on a popular early story for *ANALOG*, for exactly that purpose, to prepare the way for *Speaker*--which, all along, he had envisioned as his salute to, and his epic-scale variation on, the metaphysical-cum-anthropological themes so vividly developed in *A Case of Conscience* by the late James Blish.

This new novel featuring Ender Wiggin--a name that has always struck me as incongruously Dickensian--is admirably complex in its religio-political background but admirably straightforward in its storytelling. Events occur pretty much in sequence, and Card manages to work in the exposition about both Ender's destruction of the, forgive me, "buggers" from his previous novel and the founding of the planetary colony of Lusitania (an ancient name for Portugal) both smoothly and entertainingly.

We learn that the creatures discovered on this world by the Portuguese-speaking settlers were dubbed porquinhos, or "piggies," and that the standard-issue Galactic organization known as Starways Congress has decreed that these sentient beings--the first found anywhere since Ender's slaughter of the buggers 3,000 years ago--are "not to be disturbed." Further, we meet the members of two prominent families on Lusitania, many of whom have been involved in the restricted study of the porquinhos; and, early on, we come to know these crisply delineated people through their distinguishing individual pasts, talents, ambitions, and quirks.

The story proper begins when the "piggies"--for reasons known only to themselves, albeit vaguely apprehended by the xenobiologist Novinha--"murder" the xenologist called Pipo, and word of this shocking event is transmitted instantaneously by ansible (a device invented by U.K. Le Guin) "to all the Hundred Worlds." On one of these, Trondheim, Andrew Wiggins learns of both Pipo's murder and Novinha's call for a *Speaker for the Dead* to "Speak" his death--i.e., truthfully summarize and place in meaningful perspective the life of the deceased--and so resolves to travel the twenty-two lightyears to Lusitania aboard a vessel moving at sublight speeds. With him, he takes the cocoon of the bugged queen, in the hope that Lusitania will prove an

apt place to revive the species that he, at the unlikely age of 14, obliterated while believing himself to be playing a complex kind of computer game.

(Let me note parenthetically that every time Card alludes to these Saturday-morning cartoon events from *Ender's Game*, *Speaker*, too, lapses into embarrassing unbelieveability. The earlier novel prepares the way for this one, yes, but it also casts its juvenile pall over its protagonist's adult adventures.)

Traveling to Lusitania from Trondheim, Ender grows only a few months older while every planetbound person in the Hundred Worlds ages twenty years. (Relativistic travel accounts for the fact that he is only 36 years old, subjectively, while more than 3,000 years have passed in planetary time since the war with the buggers.) On Trondheim, Valentine, Ender's historian sister, gives birth to a daughter, who is already a young woman when he reaches Lusitania. Further, during his journey, Novinha cancels her call for a *Speaker* only to have two of her own children put in a summons for someone to Speak the death of their disease-ravaged father, a figure whose mysterious off-stage presence haunts many of the novel's subsequent events. And, once on Lusitania, Ender must win over not only the hostile members of Novinha Ribiera's family but also the planet's suspicious political and religious leaders.

Let me here dispense with plot summary. *Speaker for the Dead* carefully braids several narrative and thematic strands--namely, an evolutionary/ecological mystery story; the demands and rewards of community commitment ("A powerful orthodoxy is annoying, but essential to the community"); the strengthening and/or crippling tug of powerful family relationships; the moral responsibility of an advanced sentient species to a sentient species still early in its evolutionary growth; the tensions engendered by differing world views that themselves arise from hard-to-reconcile differences in evolution and biology; and the preemptive need for plain speaking, i.e., truth-telling, especially in situations where the truth has heretofore been concealed or compromised.

Speaker is thus a complex, ambitious novel with many inventive or insightful touches. The novel demonstrates that Card is willing not only to test his talent but to plunge his readers, too, into a narrative crucible forcing us to examine our own ethical biases, politics, societal prejudices, and species-dictated preconceptions--in short, our very consciences. This is a compelling reason for reading a book, any book, and aficionados of category-enlarging science fiction would be foolish to overlook, sidestep, or dismiss this novel.

Card offers us plenty to praise. He devises a vocabulary for "orders of foreignness" that I can see other SF writers borrowing to good effect (as he borrows Le Guin's invention of the ansible), and how often does a colleague break that kind of ground? These terms include "utlanning," a stranger from our own world; "framling," a human from another world; "raman," "the stranger that we recognize as human but of another species"; and "varelse," or the true, unknowable alien. (Card's "piggies," we learn early on, are ramen.) He gives Ender a computer companion, Jane, who becomes as

real to us as many of the novel's human characters. He invents a fascinating monastic order on Lusitania known as the Children of the Mind of Christ. He posits a disease, the Descolada, that has complex plot implications for both the "piggies" and Lusitania's human colonists. And he tells his story in a simple, serviceable prose that occasionally rises to a kind of elegaic eloquence: "When you walk on the face of a world again, then forgiveness comes."

The chapter entitled "The Ribiera House," in which Ender meets Novinha's children, displays many of Card's strengths as a novelist--not merely as a science-fictioneer--to excellent advantage. From Olhado, the son with "electronic eyes," to Quim, guilt-ridden and resentful, to Grego, the boy who uses his bladder to make a statement that he cannot otherwise articulate, to the older and hence more mature Ela and Miro, each of these characters acquires a distinct individual hue and credibility; and Card colors them in with vibrant, economical strokes. As a result, this chapter is alternately poignant, funny, and suspenseful. It would never work as a short story, relying so heavily on its elaborate context, but it nevertheless stands as a striking cameo of all that Card does well when he sets himself the task of dramatizing the glories and pratfalls of our shared humanity.

Does the novel have shortcomings? Yes, I think so. Card, with training as a playwright, has never been one to make his readers--to use Conrad's imperative verb--see. The prose evocation of the textures, tastes, smells, sounds, and exotic sights of alien worlds and fauna either bores him or eludes his imagination. We get lots of good (as well as only marginally interesting) talk, but precious few--if any--passages that lift his "piggies" out of the realm of Disneyland critters into the truly breathtaking territory of the Unfamiliar Other. Trondheim is Sweden on a planetary scale, and Lusitania a Paramount studio with backdrops painted by indifferent hirelings. But this is such a trademark "failing" of Card's that I have nearly given up on his rectifying it. In fact, it may be that I am grudgingly--unhappily--adjusting to it.

What else? Sometimes Card's characters manifest a tendency to speak in smarmy Erich Segal ("Love means never having to say you're sorry") epigrams. Examples? In the novel's final chapter, Ender declares, "As long as you keep getting born, it's all right to die sometimes." And when he tells Novinha that he's prepared to die, his life's work is done, she replies, "Mine too...But I think that means it's time to start to live." Even so, the scattershot nature of his approach lets Card get off an occasional epigrammatic observation that is dead-on, even if infelicitously phrased: "How suddenly we find the flesh of God within us after all, when we thought that we were only made of dust." The line between earnest smarminess and real profundity is thin.

But that criticism many will disregard--perhaps with cause--as overfastidious nit-picking. And this next one may seem more of the same, even though I think it is a major miscalculation that sabotages, unfortunately and altogether unnecessarily, much of the credibility of *Speaker for the Dead* as a serious, adult SF "thought experiment" about power, love, and

responsibility. And that is the fact that Card, as omniscient narrator, and every last one of his characters, whether politicians or scientists or ecclesiastics, almost always call Lusitania's only sentient native species "piggies" (or porquinhos, the Portuguese equivalent). They call them "piggies" colloquially, "piggies" in their scientific documents, and "piggies" in most of their ansible communications. It apparently never seriously occurs to anyone--lay person, cleric, or xenologist--to assign them a taxonomic designation commensurate with their importance as a sentient species or with the honorary dignity that intelligence ought to impart them.

I got weary of the word. Besides summoning pop-culture images of Porky and Petunia, it began to have the unhappy resonance of a racial epithet. (For piggy, read nigger.) This is a distasteful impression to receive, obviously, and it unquestionably fails to gibe with Card's intentions. Still, its use willy-nilly insists on this interpretation because I can't envision any responsible group of educated people, in any conceivable projection of humanity's future, lacking the wit to give these aliens, however silly-seeming or incomprehensible their behavior, however porcine their looks, a scientific name and a decent colloquial substitute for--dear God, shades of *Ender's Game's* "buggers"--piggies.

The term's use buggers--rather, beggars--belief. It hints, against all other indications, that Card considers the game of SF novel-writing insufficiently serious to warrant the deployment of believable--realistic--terminology. And so its repeated use is an unnecessary impediment to our always problematic suspension of disbelief. Unnecessary because either he or a conscientious editor could have set the matter straight with only a few moment's thought and no disruptive tinkering with the manuscript. A small thing, this flaw, but so is a mustard seed: it exfoliates until it veils even some of the novel's virtues in a depressing umbra.

Finally, at least for my purposes here, the strange business of Ender's stewardship of the cocoon of the hive queen. Writes Card after his protagonist has taken lodgings on Lusitania, "He had long since given up feeling odd about the incongruity of stowing the future of a sentient race in a duffel under his bed." Perhaps Ender has, but I haven't--especially since the tone of *Speaker* is earnest and inquiring rather than humorous or satiric. Of course, the hive queen comes to us, both literally and figuratively, as a passenger from Card's previous book, and, as I have said, much of that award-winning novel simply didn't work for me. I won't reveal the ultimate fate of the cocoon, but concede that Card's handling of this awkward narrative strand has a thematic aptness that makes for a satisfying, if conveniently neat, ending. Moreover, Card leaves room for a sequel--albeit one likely requiring even more complex biological, religio-political exposition than even *Speaker for the Dead* contains.

I'm not a fan of sequels, series, trilogies, dreckologies, but I will probably read the next book that Card chooses to set against his Hundred Worlds backdrop. Card's work has fascinated, appalled, delighted, irritated, stimulated, exasperated, challenged, wearied, amused, mind-diddled, and/or amazed me

for a long time now. He has his shortcomings as a writer (as do most of us), not the least of which is a moral earnestness that sometimes ambles shy of convincing dramatic fulfillment, but he nearly always writes about matters of real consequence in the struggle to define, and even to transcend ourselves, as human animals, and this is a tendency in any would-be artist that only a nihilist would decline to value. *Speaker for the Dead*, notwithstanding the flaws that I have fairly or unfairly imputed to it, represents a noteworthy stride in Card's development as an artist. *Eclipse* (Volume I of the *A Song Called Youth* trilogy) by John Shirley (Bluejay Books, 1985, 341 pp., \$8.95)

In his letter to FORUM 97, Shirley writes that he thinks "both *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* are not Nebula quality." He continues, "They're all right, they're better than many novels, but they're not that good, there are more deserving novels--something which is obvious to a surprising number of people." I would agree with Shirley about *Ender's Game*, but disagree with the way that his phrasing implies that it and *Speaker* are indistinguishable peas-in-the-same-pod siblings, literary clones. Novels far less ambitious, and perhaps less accomplished, than *Speaker* have already won Nebula Awards...so why disqualify it from competing for an honor that, ostensibly at least, has as its sole criterion the literary merit of the works recommended for it?

More of that in a moment.

What about Shirley's *Eclipse*? In granting me an okay to quote from his letter, Shirley requested that I point out that nowhere in it did he draw a comparison between *Eclipse* and any work by Orson Scott Card. He expressed the feeling that Card, in his reply, had tried to suggest that his, Shirley's, doubts about the fairness of the Nebula process were largely the product of "sour grapes." He added that he never had any expectations of competing seriously for the 1986 Nebula because both he and his novel "are too politically (and fannishly) controversial to win." These disclaimers noted, I propose to look at *Eclipse* as objectively as I can, assessing it altogether independently of my feelings about this controversy and my foregoing remarks about Card's novels.

Eclipse is an ambitious, kaleidoscopic book that extrapolates from current political, economic, and social trends an unpleasant near-future tomorrow. It employs a multiple viewpoint narration of the kind often used by the late Philip K. Dick (not to mention such best-selling artists as James A. Michener, Leon Uris, and Alan Drury), and it unfolds against several vivid settings--the ruined city of Amsterdam; the orbiting Petri dish of an L-5 colony known as FirStep; the bizarre, bazaarlike "urban raft" of derelict ships, called Freezone, that has accreted around the drilling platforms off the Moroccan coast; etc. Each setting proves that Shirley is a dab hand at creating down-and-dirty details of an amusingly lurid stamp.

An author's note after the dedication page tells us, "This is not a post-holocaust novel. Nor is this a novel about nuclear war. It may well be that this is a pre-holocaust novel." Like Ursula Le Guin, Shirley may believe that nuclear war is not survivable and that anyone

who today attempts to write a post-holocaust novel in the tradition of classics like Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Edgar Pangborn's *Davy* has succumbed to an immoral variety of wishful thinking. At any rate, *Eclipse* begins after the use of tactical nuclear weapons by both Soviet and NATO forces has Balkanized--indeed, totally chaoticized--Western Europe. Into this vacuum move new combatants: the fascist private police force called Second Alliance International Security Corporation ("SAISC, or SA for short") and a romantic international underground of good guys known as the New Resistance (NR).

(Let me here interject that Shirley suffers from what I can't help thinking of as an Acronym Fetish. Apparently feeling that initials impart verisimilitude, he sprinkles them through *Eclipse*, particularly the first hundred-plus pages, like commas. Some are legitimate, some are invented, but finally they all begin to seem comical eruptions of fetishistic obsession: ABCAB, CAWS, CIA, CK, CLE, CSD, CSO, DH, EMP, EVA, ITE, JAS, LSSE, NR, RD, RR, SAISC, SWAPO, SWS, UNIRA, etc. Yes, I made a list of them. It became an entertaining game.)

Meanwhile, on FirStep, tensions build between administrators and proles. This latter group Shirley calls technicks. He gives them their own values and language (a devolved, pidgen variety of English), and complicates the revolt brewing among them by having the Soviet Union impose a blockade on the orbiting colony. Two of the novel's most interesting characters, Benjamin Brian Rimpler and his daughter Claire, are members of Admin. Indeed, Rimpler founded the colony, and we first meet him in a distasteful sadomasochistic sex scene that may--I don't really know--have its inspiration in a like, even more graphic, scene in Thomas Pynchon's apocalyptic World War II novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Distasteful or no, it gives us an early clue to Rimpler's loosening grip on events aboard the colony and a sudden disturbing insight into his character.

Much later, a speech of Rimpler's to Claire comprises one of the most striking passages in the entire novel. Although in many ways a weak, easy-to-despise human being, Rimpler was once strong; and his words embody a reflective, wistful sort of plain-speaking, or truth-telling, that I regard as impressive evidence of Shirley's potential powers as novelist. The speech contains an observation to which almost any adult in middle years can assent, probably with an instantaneous flash of recognition. Here is an excerpt:

"You have a wide freedom of choice as a young person. Relatively speaking. As you grow, you build on to what you've built, and on to that, and on to that, and attach yourself to it, and you create a sort of web of...conceptions and misconceptions of the world. Right or wrong, these ideas solidify around you, and hem you in. And you do things in accordance with the ideas, and then you must justify what you do, if you are to live with yourself. So your choices diminish. Until you are no longer making them, you are simply building a pattern on a pattern."

Pretty damn insightful for an ambivalently self-reputed member of the "cyberpunk"

movement, whose icons are supposed to be youth, radical politics, global social and sociological awareness, various high-tech kicks, and the transcendental power of rock music...and all the more impressive for just that reason.

Which leads me to note that maybe the most memorable character in *Eclipse*, because possibly the best drawn, is the rock musician Rick Rickenharp, whom we first encounter in the Freezone section of the book. Oddly, until the final few pages, Rickenharp's role in the narrative's major events is peripheral and secondary, and his presence seems primarily designed to allow the author to detail the grimly funky recreations of the denizens of Freezone. (Here, by the way, Shirley's prose becomes weirdly tangled and clunky: "Most of what passed between them was semiotically transmitted with the studied indirection of the terminally cool"--a self-contradictory melange of the hip and the professorial reiterated in a line about Freezone residents "carefully avoiding personal-space margins, as if afraid of the volatility of dormant sexual elasticity.") But *Eclipse* comes alive in those sections in which Rickenharp appears; and it must undoubtedly be because Shirley knows--really knows--the counterculture milieu that has spawned him.

Rickenharp is by no means a nihilist. When his band dissolves, he mourns. And he mourns because "the band is my family." This point gets more stress later, when he reflects that "it was almost impossible to make anyone understand why that (losing the band) was, to him, like a man losing his wife and children." Even with his addiction to "blue mesc," and his wasted appearance, and his lack of talent with an automatic weapon, Rickenharp invites--yea, pathetically demands--the reader's sympathy; and when he thunders out an enemy-distracting crescendo of guitar music from the Arc de Triomphe at novel's end ("I don't wanna be yo' slave..."), how can any antifascist reader--or, for that matter, any fan of such button-pushing Hollywood epics as *Rambo*--resist the urge to cheer Shirley's Rimbaud-esque hero?

Much has been made, by Shirley herself and by Bruce Sterling, the "ideologue-in-chief" of the cyberpunk movement, of the "radical politics" of *Eclipse*. Since when is opposition to open, covert, fascism, particularly in our Western democracies, an example of "radical politics"? Since when is the mere description, no matter how vivid, of different kinds of counterculture living a reliable index of "radical politics"? Since when, so far as that goes, is the detestation of racism, environmental rape, class-ism, and the cynical exploitation of the poor the private monopoly of advocates of "radical politics"?

What I'm trying to suggest here is that *Eclipse*, by almost any reading you care to give it, is a humane, affirmative document, and that Shirley is deluding himself if he really thinks that the novel is "too politically controversial" to win an award. (I am making no reference at all to Shirley's status with fandom. I know little of it and care less.) In short, I, for one, see absolutely nothing "politically controversial" about *Eclipse*--but, of course, I'm an independent Democrat who by both instinct and definition is always on the side of the good guys.

Other of Shirley's characters warrant quick mention, especially the SA's fundamentalist-Christian leader Smiling Rick Crandall and his sister Ellen Mae; the NR guerilla Jack Brendan Smoke, whose best friend is a crow; the inventor Kessler, some of whose mind is "cerebrokidnapped" (CK'd, gang) by the SA; and an NR infiltrator of SA headquarters named Swenson who reluctantly seduces Ellen Mae for the Good of the World--if, that is, he isn't being seduced by the Nazilike rituals of those on whom he is ambivalently spying. All of these people come alive, however dimly or briefly, which is not something I can say of the NR honcho Steinfeld, or the NR operative with the comic-book monicker Hard-Eyes, or the named but anonymous technicki rebels on FirStep, or the mesc-addicted female companion of Rickenharp--all of whom seem to be on hand more as plot props than as people. Already, they have pretty much dwindled to ciphers in my memory.

Let me pick a nit or two. For the most part, Shirley manages to convey the worldly savvy of an insider, whether dramatizing a drug deal on Freezone, or the housekeeping functions of his space colony, or the behind-the-scenes machinations of organizations like NATO and his invented New Alliance. Maybe he accomplishes this--to quote his "Make It Scream" column from the last issue of THRUST--"by reason of a textural depth and a verisimilitude obtaining from a revolution in style and hyper-dense information conveyance, and through new methods of research peculiar to cyberpunk." Well, yeah, maybe. And let me confess that I'm genuinely curious about these "new methods of research peculiar to cyberpunk." It's just that I fear that they must exclude any method so prosaic as looking through a dictionary or a desktop encyclopedia.

For instance? Within three pages, Shirley commits two blunders that undermine the reader's faith in his understanding of the usage patterns of European and Middle Eastern languages. In one passage, Rickenharp hears a man's "guttural voice" and concludes that he is "speaking Swiss." Really? I've never heard of the Swiss Language and have it on good authority that the people of that country speak German, French, Italian, or--a paltry one per cent--Romansh. Immediately after this scene, Shirley gives us "an anchorwoman who looks as if she should be speaking Farsi," but then informs us that another character kicks the TV switch and makes "the lovely Arab face compact and vanish." Farsi is Persian, the language spoken by half the people in Iran. Only a small percentage of Iranians are Arabs, and few of them would regularly speak Farsi.

Yes, yes, these are nits. But I pick them precisely because Shirley has gone to such extremes, elsewhere, to argue that "There has always been 'if this goes on' SF--but never before has it so chillingly rung with truth." An appropriate critical term for this claim--and one already in the cyberpunk vocabulary--is "horseshit." I know that Norman Spinrad is fond of the term, and his novel *Bug Jack Barron* and his story "The Big Flash" prefigure, and conceivably surpass, much of what Shirley and other cyberpunks sometimes attempt to do in their work.

Finally, because of its kaleidoscopic structure--the multiple viewpoint approach to storytelling--often the potential power and impact of *Eclipse* are pulled taffy-thin. Stretches of the book are tedious, its parts vary widely in both intensity and interest, and often the momentum building in one story line gets derailed by the author's return to a less involving plot strand. That's a built-in hazard of the Dickian, or bestseller, approach, and Shirley has not yet mastered it. The fact that Volumes II and III of *A Song Called Youth* loom ahead virtually guarantees that Shirley will be using it again, and, given my flagging interest in parts of Volume I, we can only hope that his skills in orchestrating structure improve from novel to novel.

Even so, *Eclipse* is an earnest effort well worth any reader's time. I look forward to following Shirley's artistic development through this--help me, please--trilogy, and beyond. He needs to pare down his style, jettison some jargon, sharpen the focus on his people, and get a firmer grip on structure, but his is not a negligible talent, and *Eclipse* may well deserve its place--along with William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Lewis Shiner's *Frontera*, and Sterling's *Schismatrix*--as one of the oft-ballyhooed cornerstones of the cyberpunk movement. Even if one of the premier ballyhooers of this corner is Shirley himself.

III. Cleaning Up the Grue

As noted, I've rec'd both *Speaker for the Dead* and *Eclipse* for the 1986 Nebula Award. I think *Speaker* a good deal more successful on its own terms than *Eclipse*, even though comparing the books is a lot like equating plantains and pineapples. The virtues of both novels outweigh their shortcomings, however, and I see no reason why an admirer of one book could not admire the other...despite the fact that Card--in the heat of his anger at John Shirley for accusing him of an "unconscious" variety of "campaigning"--states forthrightly that Shirley, given his politics, is "supposed to" hate *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* because they are stories "of people who belong to and work within their community." And the strong implication--which I hope that Card, upon reflection, may yet retract or amend--is that the readership for his novels and Shirley's could not possibly overlap. Of course they could, and in me, at least, they clearly do.

Considering the competition, do I believe that either *Speaker* or *Eclipse* should win the 1986 Nebula Award for Best Novel? No, I don't. My favorite among the candidates that I've read is *This Is the Way the World Ends* by James Morrow, a brilliant satire on the East-West arms race and a witty, wildly compassionate look at the consequences to the human race of our premature extinction. By all rights, I should review Morrow's book here, but neither time nor space permits me that pleasure. Suffice it to say that Morrow has been underappreciated by SFWA members for his first two novels, *The Wine of Violence* and *The Continent of Lies*, and that he shows such startling artistic control and intelligence in *This Is the Way the World Ends* that I can envision his reaching a large mainstream readership without diluting his appeal to diehard SF fans. If, that is, justice is

served. And justice would be given a leg up, and the reputation of SFWA enhanced, if our membership had the good sense to vote Morrow the trophy.

But beyond the Morrow, the Card, and the Shirley titles, I also like *Free Live Free* by Gene Wolfe, Paul Preuss's *Human Error*, Terry Bisson's *Talking Man*, Robert Charles Wilson's *A Hidden Place*, and a couple of other titles. And I'm happy to see that *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, primarily a mainstream novelist, has 21 recommendations. In light of my belief that SFWA often overlooks books by "outsiders," I regret that I haven't yet read the Atwood novel. I plan to do so as soon as I can make the time, preferably before January is out.

Nor have I read Gibson's *Count Zero*, or *Heart of the Comet* by Gregory Benford and David Brin, or competing novel-length works by Kate Wilhelm, Megan Lindholme, Pamela Sargent, Joan Slonczewski, Suzy McKee Charnas, Leigh Kennedy, James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, and a great many others. One of the fortunate/unfortunate truths of the Nebula year is that publishers are issuing more books--and more admirable books--than it is possible to keep up with, especially if SFWA members hope to do some writing themselves and a modicum of healthy reading outside the field.

If so many good books are appearing, books that it would not be shameful to bestow laurels upon, why the controversy over the 1985 Nebula for Card's *Ender's Game*? And why the current brouhaha about the formidable lead that *Speaker for the Dead* has in the 1986 Nebula sweepstakes? Card, understandably perplexed by the "fuss," has a theory of his own, specifically, that *Ender's Game* "really is an outrageous choice to people of a certain ideology....It's a book for people who belong to a demanding community and say yes to it." For Card's sake, I wish that I could agree with this theory; unfortunately and, I think, justifiably, I don't. I believe that the "fuss" over *Ender's Game*'s victory arises not from any political/ideological quarrel with its major themes, but from documentable aesthetic doubts about its quality. I regard it, and am not alone in regarding it, as far less than a total success. I realize that this opinion is endlessly debatable, but another provocative point is worth making here.

Except for Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage* (1968), a tour de force narrated by a teenage girl, *Ender's Game* is the only novel to win the Nebula whose main characters are children or adolescents throughout the entire narrative, and *Rite of Passage* took its award seventeen years ago. Thomas M. Disch, whose mordant work Card does not usually admire, once wrote an iconoclastic, semiserious essay viewing science fiction as "a branch of children's literature." If memory serves, he cited SF's he-man heroes, its power fantasies, and its cosy denouements as evidence of its general failure to come to grips with adult issues. He angered many people in the field with these observations, but his intent (I think) was to bring home a legitimate criticism of the field via satirical exaggeration. Too often, SF does look at the cosmos with the wide-open eyes, and the dangerous lack of both judgment and maturity, of the child, and Disch emphasized this point in the hope

that doing so would prove salutary.

Is *Ender's Game* an example of "children's literature"? I know that Card and the book's admirers don't see it in this light, and I know, too, that Card earnestly intended it to transcend its obvious category trappings--initiation through combat, war in space--by giving the novel a moral dimension lacking in the commonplace run of battle-oriented space opera. I sympathize with his intent, but believe that he stumbles badly in its execution, particularly by failing to allow his 6-year-old characters to talk, think, and act like credible 6-year-olds. And by insisting that the reader, adult or otherwise, follow his childish or adolescent heroes through page after page of tedious combat training to reach--late in the book--the plot revelation that turns the whole situation upside-down, ostensibly throwing every earlier event into high moral relief. I think this revelation comes far too late and find myself agreeing, as much as this admission is sure to disappoint Card, with Norman Spinrad's judgement in a recent "On Books" column for ASIMOV'S that "*Ender's Game* is a frustrating read." And many other SFWA members, few of them actively hostile to Card's ideology, have clearly had similar, honest, negative reactions to the book.

The intensity of these negative reactions, and the bitterness that Card's Nebula has spawned, stem not merely from jealousy or sour grapes, I think, but from a widespread feeling that almost any of the other six novels on the final ballot with *Ender's Game* would have been better--less juvenile-seeming--exemplars of what SF can do both to entertain and to illuminate. Card confesses that he himself was convinced that *Helliconia Winter* by Brian W. Aldiss--"the capstone of one of the few truly magnificent works of science fiction"--deserved the 1985 award.

Aldiss himself has voiced merited high praise--"readable, comprehensible, even, perhaps, poetic in its expression"--for Sterling's *Schismatrix* in his revised history of science fiction, *Trillion Year Spree*; and Sterling's groundbreaking book had many other enthusiastic partisans. So did David Brin's *The Postman*, which won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, and Tim Powers' *Dinner at Deviant's Palace*, which won the Philip K. Dick Award for the best paperback original of the year. Greg Bear's audacious *Blood Music* might have fared better in the balloting if it had not already won both a Nebula and a Hugo in its earlier incarnation as a novelet. And Barry Malzberg's *The Remaking of Sigmund Freud*, his best novel since *Herovlt's World*, certainly warranted the favorable and/or bemused attention that it received.

All of these books had adult protagonists, and I am convinced that if any of them--with the possible exception of Malzberg's, since his work has always provoked debate--had taken the Nebula, no unseemly wrangle over the suitability of the award would have broken out among SFWA's membership. As Card writes in his letter to FORUM 97, "We give out the awards because the award symbolizes a striving for excellence. The very giving of awards shows that we're aware that science fiction is not a cookie-cutter genre--that some things are better than other things, that we care about the difference." It is this very

caring, I think, that has caused the commotion over *Ender's Game*'s triumph. For, if the Nebula--again in Card's words--"shows the rest of the literary world that we are developing our own critical standards," the 1985 award seems to suggest that we value adolescent-seeming space opera, whatever the author's ultimate intention, over a "capstone" achievement like Aldiss's, a complex and dazzling future history like Sterling's, a recombinant DNA extravaganza with the transcendental dimensions of Bear's, and so on. And such an award, given by the writers in this field, reinforces rather than dispels the engrained proclivity of the larger literary world to despise or ignore our work--a result that no partisan of ambitious SF can help but rue.

Which raises the question, "How and why did *Ender's Game* win its award?" The simple answer is, "Because a plurality of SFWA's members preferred it to the other books on the final ballot." In my last column here, I wrote, "The Nebula, like the Hugo, is also a popularity contest, its only difference from the fan award being that one's colleagues--fellow writers--may give it to signal their affection for the writer rather than to suggest their respect for this person's work." Upon consideration, I now disagree with this statement--at least in part. I believe that those who put *Ender's Game* first on their ballots did so because they liked it better than any of the other finalists that they had read. I don't question their integrity, but, in the hallowed American tradition of Monday-morning quarterbacking, I do question their critical acumen. This is my right, as it is the right of admirers of Card's book to dispute my assessments.

Nor do I think it unfair or improper--although the matter is a sensitive one requiring tact as well as truth-telling--to look at the degree to which Card's high visibility in the field may have encouraged the steady stream of recommendations that his novels and stories have generated over the past two years. In this, I guess, I find myself in complete momentary agreement with John Shirley, whose letter to FORUM 97 cites three activities that have increased Card's visibility and conceivably led to a gradual upsurge in the number of Nebula recs accruing to his work. First, his place as an indefatigable reviewer of short fiction for Richard Geis's *SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW*. Second, his energetic ubiquity as a recommender of other writers' works, particularly short stories and novelets. And, third, his inevitably conspicuous position as the editor of *NEBULA AWARDS REPORTS*, for which he gathered, toted, and published the rec of every work cited by eligible members as worthy of award consideration.

No one can deny that Card--for reasons having to do with his talent, his enviable resources of energy, his desire to serve, his devotion to the field, and his legitimate career ambitions--is a high-profile figure in SFWA. On the other hand, no one can impugn his motives (and Shirley, I think, tries not to impugn them in his letter to FORUM, although a remark like "Where there's smoke, there's fire" does little to bolster this intent) without stooping to some invidious Freudian speculation. Still, on the third hand, whatever Card's motives, and I choose to think them

either laudable or innocent, no one can deny that high visibility has the potential to translate into a wider readership, both within SFWA and without, and that this wider audience within the organization may translate into a marked increase in Nebula recs.

It need not, of course, but it may. Advertising is based on this very principle. Most of us know what Coca-Cola is, but the Coca-Cola company continues to flood the airways with spots touting Coke. Why? Because marketing studies have proved that doing so increases sales. Keeping a name before the public, whether that of a film star or that of a toilet-bowl cleaner, usually results in an upsurge of interest in, or a more ready acceptance of, the person or product thus touted. In fact (although I think that I have some far purer motives in gear), it is unquestionably the case that one of the reasons that I keep doing my THRUST column--not a terribly lucrative endeavor--is that Mr. Fratz bylines me on the cover and gives me a ready billboard for my opinions.

Well, so what? Must I, in any year that I have published an original SF story or novel, either give up writing criticism or, as Spinrad has done, withdraw my work from award competition? I would hope not. Either of these austere alternatives would penalize me for qualities that most Westerners see as attractive--ambition, industry, self-expression, the righteous exercise of one's critical faculties, and the benign attempt to wield one's influence in what one rightly or wrongly regards as a Good Cause. In my opinion, no one has the right to tell me to stop writing reviews. Therefore, no one has the right to ask Card to cease and desist, either. And because he will be writing reviews of "mainstream science fiction short stories" for his new magazine *SHORT FORM*, and doing a column of brief book reviews for Ed Ferman's *FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION*, no one need expect his early departure from the critical enterprise. Indeed, I am myself spurred to renewed activity by the prospect of his expanding presence--because he and I have differing views of what is, or can be, good for the field.

But Card also acquires a significant degree of his visibility within SFWA as a house recommender of other writers' works and as editor of the in-house newsletter that collects and publishes these recs. Under Card's editorship, the NEBULA AWARDS REPORTS has been for two years a timely, legible, and impeccably complete record of what the membership views as "damn fine piece(s) of writing" in each of the four length-defined categories. And for this scrupulously conscientious work, Card deserves the praise of everyone who takes the Nebulas at all seriously, and who reads NAR to find out what their colleagues have admired and publicly boosted. Anyone who thinks that Card has skimmed on his responsibility must have gone to sleep in the fall of 1984 and awakened, groggily, only yesterday.

However, to prevent another controversy of this sort, for the peace of mind of both a paranoid membership and any future NAR editor, SFWA should now change the rules to give this job only to persons who neither publish nor recommend, or who altruistically agree to remove their work from Nebula consideration and to refrain from

recommending during the year, or years, that they hold this onerous position. Am I volunteering? Hell, no. I don't want the job under SFWA's present rules, and I certainly won't want it under my suggested revisions. They demand more than I want to give, and I would regard any working writer who accepted the position under their conditions as a living saint. Still, to guarantee that the Nebulas have the same degree of integrity as Caesar's wife, and to spare subsequent NAR editors the emotional turmoil that Card has suffered (even with his trophy for conjectural consolation), SFWA must quickly instigate this change. Just as the Nebula jury cannot add the work of any sitting member to the final ballot, so should the work of the NAR editor--from henceforth; not retroactively--be deemed ineligible for our Lucite doorstops.

No stigma should accrue to Card because of this rule change. Despite his award and the likely demurral of John Shirley, he has been victimized by the prevailing set of arrangements in SFWA and by the murmurings--not excluding mine--of his colleagues. I see this as unhealthy for the organization and as terribly unfair to Card. We must not let another such "fuss" divide us again. In the meantime, *Speaker for the Dead* has every right to compete for the 1986 Nebula. If it should happen to win, hard on the heels of *Ender's Game*'s victory, I plan to send Card my heartfelt--let me emphasize that--my heartfelt congratulations.

IV. The Nebula as Grail

I have written all this conscious of the fact that some people, England's Joseph Nicholas for one, regard SFWA's Nebulas as--I believe this is a direct quote--"a joke." Do they work? Can they work? Are they irrelevant, obsolete, or so corrupt that only their abolition could restore SFWA's credibility? Some--Norman Spinrad joining Nicholas--would probably give their assent to at least one, and possibly all three, of these perjorative speculations.

Sometimes, I fear, the Nebulas don't work. Or, at least, they don't work very well. The only British writers to win the Nebula--if we exclude superstar Arthur C. Clarke, who at any rate lives in Sri Lanka--are Brian Aldiss, whose novella "The Saliva Tree" shared that category's award with Zelazny's "He Who Shapes" in 1965, and Michael Moorcock, who won with his novella "Behold the Man" in 1967. But in the past two decades, British writers, Clarke aside, have not fared well in the balloting. J.G. Ballard, John Brunner, Christopher Priest, Keith Roberts, Bob Shaw, Angela Carter, Ian Watson, Richard Cowper, M. John Harrison, and other strong talents from the British Isles are all suspiciously Nebula-less. American writers must be far superior to the Brits, right? Well, no. But since SFWA is preponderantly a U.S. gang, we Americans tend to read and recommend the works of our red-white-and-blue buddies and to ignore or look askance at the unfamiliar approaches occasionally favored by our transatlantic colleagues. Democracy at work, I suppose, but also an eye-opening indictment of SFWA's provincialism.

Last issue, I railed against SFWA's tendency, stronger now than in the late 1960s/early 1970s, to exclude almost

automatically from consideration any work by a writer who has moved out of the genre or who has made a rare literary incursion into it. In 1969, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* appeared on the final ballot in the novel category; in 1971, Jerzy Kosinski's "Being There" made the final ballot as a novella; and in 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon finished well behind Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* in the best-novel voting. Since then, I believe, only two other books by writers from outside the field, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1975) and Gore Vidal's *Kalki* (1978), have had even a remote shot at winning a Nebula. Neither did. No work deserves consideration for the sole reason that its author has a high-powered mainstream reputation, but neither should such works be disqualified for that reason. Some, I think, have been.

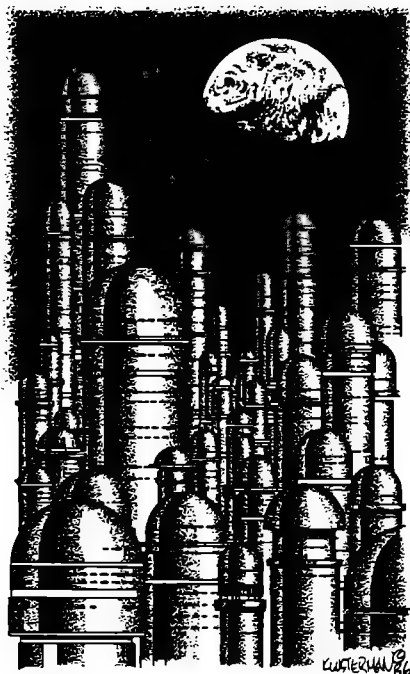
Which is why I'm glad to see Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* doing well in the 1986 recommendations. If it makes the final ballot, and if other marginally mainstream works follow suit throughout what's left of this decade and into the 1990s, well, I'll fry and eat this criticism. But I'm not yet greasing a skillet.

Are there other criticisms to level against the Nebulas? In an article entitled "Spring Fever: Writing for Writers" in the Summer 1986 issue of *THE BULLETIN OF THE SFWA*, Charles Sheffield lists all the criticisms that he has ever heard, including 1) that we don't need the Nebulas, 2) that "real" writers have no time to read and rec other writers' work, 3) that--my favorite--mainstream writers look upon the Nebulas "as Gold Medals in the Special Olympics of literature," 4) that they're rigged, 5) that they don't represent the true virtues of the field, and 6) the sardonic inquiry "if the Nebulas did not exist, would it be necessary to invent them?"

Sheffield succinctly and not unpersuasively dismisses all these criticisms. The body of his article demonstrates some of the chief and most pleasurable virtues of SF writing, and he concludes, "We need the Nebula Awards for one single reason: there is no other award...which is given for the quality of science fiction writing, not by a small cadre of individual judges, but by a seven hundred member organization of science fiction writers. And that fact outweighs any possible objection that people have to the awards."

Maybe, I don't for a minute believe that this argument will, or even should, squelch all future debate over the relevance or the sagacity of the collective membership's choices. But it assumes that members vote honestly for their considered favorites among all the nominees and that democracy even in the subjective evaluation of individual attempts at art has its place. By these criteria, even the much-mumbled-about *Ender's Game* deserves its award, and on that fair-minded judgement even I come uneasily to rest. The awards are what the members of SFWA make them. We have ourselves to blame if they disappoint us. We have ourselves to thank if they appear to do us proud. Each member--to my mind, even the most busily prolific among us--has an obligation either to champion their abolition or to work for the unlikely, demonstrably hopeless, goal of their perfection, regarding ourselves as fools but our cause as a grail evermore worthy of pursuit. □

FROM THE PICTURED URN



Charles Sheffield

**A RECTANGLE FOR LEIBOWITZ
OR
PLEASE PUT ME IN THE UPPER
RIGHT CORNER**

Science Fiction Populations

Are you reading more and enjoying it less?
Are you reading less and enjoying it less?

One of my worries these days is that I am much involved in science fiction, but reading very little of it. When I was 15 years old I devoured as many sf books as I could get my hands on. In those far-off days, it was not all that many: maybe two a week. As I remember it, I enjoyed everything. Today I buy or am sent at least three times that many, but I only read two sf books in a good month. Often I begin a story (even an award-winner) and find that I can't get into it. Sometimes I do get into it, finish it, and wish I hadn't bothered.

Well, sure, I'm older and more cynical

now, and a lot more difficult to please. "The Golden Age of science fiction is 14," etc. But I'm not persuaded that the change is all in me.

Nor will I suggest that science fiction was once well-written, while today it is poorly written. The trend has all been the other way. The problem lies rather in the reason why I choose to read science fiction, and not, say, horror or westerns.

In a sentence, albeit a rather long one: I have never read science fiction for the way it is written, or for its larger-than-life heroes, finely-drawn characters, or colorful settings, but rather for its idea content, and mainly for its scientific idea content.

A story with good science does not have to be a good story. It can be a really lousy story with a compelling idea at its heart. Thus, works of science fiction can be flawed in two different ways: by scientific illiteracy or by literary illiteracy. The opportunity to fail on two different fronts is one reason why good science fiction may be harder to write than any other form of literature.

My job has given me a strong stomach for literary illiteracy. I have to read technical reports that may begin "when dismantlement has been necessitated . . ." (i.e. "When you have to take this thing apart . . ."). I translate automatically, below the forebrain level. The idea's the thing. So I can stand a good deal of tale-telling ineptitude, if the tale being told is scientifically interesting and scientifically literate. I think I am representative of a substantial group of readers, the mute, inglorious engineers who want the science to be right, who read for ideas, and who never think of writing stories themselves-- the sort of reader that I was, in fact, for many happy years.

Another group of readers, at least equally large, will allow the author to write scientific gibberish--if the tale has literary virtues. Even award-winning SF stories can have scientific nonsense at the heart. The last time I literally threw a story away from me was when I realized an author was sending characters between the stars in a cold-sleep condition, while ignoring lapsed time in the rest of the universe. The chronology was muddled and meaningless. The story was "The Only Neat Thing to Do" by James Tiptree, Jr., and most people apparently loved it.

There exists for today's SF an oddly bi-modal distribution of readers. Population One is preoccupied with an academic view of literary quality and shudders when a writer uses the word "get" four times in the same sentence, but has obviously never heard of Strunk and White. Population Two doesn't even notice all those "gets." Its members haven't heard of Strunk and White, either, but they blench when a writer puts Einstein in a list of the world's great mathematicians, or allows a radio signal to be transmitted to an underwater submarine.

Forty years ago, I suspect, the SF readership was predominantly Population Two. And for a Population Two member, science fiction is no better now than it was in the early '50s, even though the amount being written and labeled "science fiction" may have increased tenfold. I see two reasons for this. First, many good ideas had to be written about for the first time, and everything after the first time is a reworking-- perhaps a reworking of infinitely greater literary quality, but by our definition a Population Two reader

will be unimpressed by such a development. Once the first story had been written about the effects on star travelers of relativistic time dilation, everything that followed was embellishment. The first SF writers had it easy; as Arthur Clarke remarked in a totally different context, they knew the world when it was young.

Second, good ideas are regrettably rare. In a conversation with Einstein, Theodore von Karman, a father of modern aerodynamics (and also founder of Jet Propulsion Laboratories) said that in his lifetime he thought he had had two good ideas; Einstein replied that he thought he had had perhaps three. A top SF writer in his lifetime will also have maybe three good ideas.

Of course, these are good ideas. I have met people who told me that they overflow with good ideas, more than they can ever use--but somehow they never seem to be able to tell me what they are. I suspect they are of the order of "I have a really great idea! Let's go out and have pancakes for breakfast!"

Here are a couple of fairly recent raw ideas that swept me away intellectually when I encountered them. The first is the Gaia concept of James Lovelock (who is, by the way, a science fiction author, but of a book I have never read or even seen. If anyone can tell me how to get my hands on a copy, I would be grateful. I think the title is *The Greening of Mars*).

Lovelock proposes that the existence of life on Earth regulates the composition of the atmosphere, the oceans and the land surfaces, in such a way that temperature, pressure and atmospheric composition are stabilized. Once you get your head around this notion it has breathtaking scope. (It is not at all as easy as I am making it sound; Lynn Margulis, one of the principal supporters of Lovelock's ideas, says it took her two years to really understand what he was getting at.)

The second example is a simple observation about the word "evolution." I first met the comment in a book by Ilya Prigogine, though he probably did not originate it. (The work is *From Being to Becoming*, and I cannot recommend it highly enough to Population Two readers interested in the role of time in modern science). Prigogine remarks that "evolution" is used with exactly opposite meanings in physics and biology. When we speak of the evolution of the universe, or of a dynamic system, the second law of thermodynamics requires that the progression must be towards maximum entropy--that is, to more and more randomness, and to less and less complexity of structure. In biological terms, on the other hand, the evolution of organisms has been toward more structurally complex entities. This is such a simple, almost self-evident observation, that you wonder why you hadn't thought of it yourself. But as Prigogine points out, something very profound must be involved here. It is almost as though the familiar "arrow of time" idea derived from thermodynamics points in the other direction for biological systems. And that asks us to rethink the whole role of life in the universe.

When has anything in recent science fiction stimulated my mind as much as these two scientific observations? I don't know, though I can easily look back over three decades and pick out the personal high spots

of reading experience. **Mission of Gravity, Childhood's End, Dune, The Stars My Destination, "Flowers for Algernon," "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," Ringworld, The Mote in God's Eye, Timescape, Blood Music, The Anubis Gates, "New Rose Hotel"** . . .

Is there a pattern here? It was the struggle to fit these stories into some quantifiable and logical framework, while recognizing that I myself must have changed as a reader over the years, that led me to the thoughts of the next section.

How to Make A Sheffield Diagram

At this point, if experience is any guide, I can easily get myself into deep trouble. I will therefore avoid the naming of names, except maybe at the very end.

Once we accept the idea that some science fiction is appealing mainly because of its literary qualities, while other SF has little literary merit but possesses thought-provoking scientific ideas, we can put this into the form of a chart. A Sheffield Diagram is constructed as follows: Take a piece of paper, and along a horizontal axis at the bottom of the page plot scientific originality. Allow idea content to run from a scale of zero (no science ideas at all) to 100 (superb scientific content). Along a vertical axis, on the left hand side of the page, plot literary merit. This encompasses all the non-science parts (plot, background, characters, style) and again is given a range from zero to one hundred. Draw in the limiting lines at the top and on the right, corresponding to scores of one hundred. The result is an empty square box, into which we can now place every SF writer, living or dead.

Here, of course, is where the trouble starts. The empty box is innocuous enough, but where will we put Mr. Y and Ms. X? (I originally wrote "Mr. X and Ms. Y," but if that form does not make you feel at least vaguely dissatisfied, you are probably not a Population Two reader.)

Before we try to fill the box, let me make a few preliminary observations.

I have spoken of scientific ideas, but of course SF admits many other ways of provoking thought, ranging from new social theories to cautionary tales. One diagram won't capture everything, and if we try cram the whole SF world into the Procrustean bed of a single two-dimensional figure, we will lose a great deal of detail. That's inevitable, but complaining that my diagram concentrates on science alone is like complaining that a dog is not a cat.

Second, some writers produce many different types of stories. It is not unusual to find that successive stories in a writer's canon are hard SF followed by fantasy. I suggest three ways of accommodating this: We can use individual stories, rather than writers; or we can represent a writer by a distribution of points on our diagram; or we can define him or her by some representative point, which we believe best characterizes a whole body of work. That's what I do. It's a subjective evaluation, but so of course is the assessment of literary qualities.

Third, the approach that I am taking squeezes all fantasy and much presumed SF onto the single line of the left vertical axis. It would not be hard to devise a diagram that is

specific to fantasy, with another axis chosen to replace our "scientific ideas" axis. I leave this to the reader. Scientific papers, since they lack fictional plot, characters and background, seem to lie along the horizontal axis, although they vary widely in the quality of their writing.

Fourth, Sturgeon's Law says "90 percent of everything is crap." (Rigorously applied, this requires that 90 percent of Sturgeon's Law is also crap. The statement above has 31 letters; which three letters are good ones?) We deduce that the most heavily populated region of the diagram ought to be the bottom left-hand corner. Here we find stories and authors with neither ideas nor literary quality. Nine books out of ten should crowd into this corner. Ninety percent of the writers will be there, too. The editorial process helps (otherwise it would be 99 percent!) but publishers have to put out a certain number of books each month, regardless of what comes in, and the GIGO principle applies as well in publishing as anywhere else.

The ground in the bottom left-hand corner is swampy and smelly, but it is unusually fertile. Many people begin in this region (which we may term Dekalogy Wallow) but as their skills improve they struggle away to more salubrious parts of the diagram. The ooze sticks to them for a long time, though, and it is difficult to change a reputation that was first established down in the wallow. Fifth, the same diagram serves equally well to define readers. Some of the latter will be comfortable only in the rarefied air of the upper left (Critic's Corner). It is quiet here, a silence broken only by the moaning of aesthetes or the occasional twittering of an INTERZONE editor.

Over in the other corner, at the bottom right, we find Lensmansland, where a man may wander for days without meeting a recognizable human character. It's hard on the ears in Lensmansland, because of the continuous noise of bending tin. The residents are pure Population Two. Let us move on up the right-hand boundary, towards SF Paradise. Here will be found those starving unfortunates who insist on both good scientific ideas and good writing. They search for sustenance in the almost empty zone of the upper right hand corner, and they go for years between books.

The most fortunate readers are those who ask for neither science nor literature. They can live happily within the Fertile Crescent of the lower left. These people are beloved of both writers and publishers, and they never lack for suitable reading material.

Sixth, award-winning stories do not usually reside in the upper right-hand corner, even though this might seem the logical place for them. Whenever a radically new scientific idea appears in SF, the writer tends to be overwhelmed by the power of it. Others, coming a little later, are able to employ the same thoughts in a more perfect framework. Award-winning stories may reach the 80 or 90 for literary quality, but they are rarely above the fifty mark for new scientific thoughts.

Population Testing

As suggested in the previous section, one is not obliged to be either Population One or Population Two. There are really four groups: pure Population One, who demand only

literary quality; pure Population Two, who demand only good scientific ideas; Population Three, who demand both good science and good writing (and are usually disappointed); and Population Four, who demand neither and would be just as happy reading TV GUIDE or the back of cereal boxes.

What are you? Here are a few rules that may help you decide:

1) If you think Beowulf is one of the characters in the Uncle Remus stories, you are Population Two.

2) If the word "mitosis" makes you think of a snowy-day song sung by Winnie the Pooh, you are Population One.

3) If the word "neoplasm" is in your vocabulary, but "pleonasm" is not, then you are probably Population Two.

4) If the word "pleonasm" is in your vocabulary, but the word "neoplasm" is not, then you are probably Population One.

5) Consider the name "Priestley." If your first reaction is to preface it with "J.B.," and you think of "The Good Companions," then you are Population One; put "Joseph" in front of it, and think of oxygen, and you are Population Two. If both associations are equally strong, you may be Population Three.

6) If you instinctively correct "Leaves of Grass" to "Blades of Grass," you are Population Two.

7) How do you want to end "hyperbol-"? An "a" makes you Population Two; an "e" makes you Population One.

8) If you think a Turing Machine is a misspelled description of a Winnebago, you are Population One.

9) Your friend receives a message that says "PROBLEM HERE: FAT MAC AND MS-DOS ARE INCOMPATIBLE." If you suggest counseling for the lady and the overweight Scotsman, you are Population One.

10) What part of the body can increase in size as much as 10 times with suitable stimulation? If you answered "the pupil of the eye," you are Population Two. If you answered anything else, you are Population One (and may be due for a disappointment).

Filling the Box: A Game to Play at SF Conventions

Very well, let's finally look at that empty box. We have to fill it with names, of people or of stories.

I have done this in the past--I even gave a talk at Johns Hopkins, in which I filled the blackboard with names and diagram locations, and precipitated three hours of furious squabbling. Fortunately no one photographed the board at the time, and I trust it was erased long ago, for as I get older, I get more cowardly. And I know that unless I am prepared to put everyone in the upper right-hand corner of the box, it is an act of folly to populate the diagram with living writers.

However, there is a coward's way out. I am quite prepared to act as a clearing-house for other people's ideas, and present the results in some future column. So here are about 251 SF writers. Draw the diagram, put in each writer as a numbered point, and send me the result. Use my numbers, please, and not author's initials, or it becomes much harder to combine different diagrams. When I

see what is sent to me, I will average the writers over all the diagrams I receive, and find out who fits where.

Just to be sure how the system works, I have placed a handful of writers (all safely dead) on the diagram, according to my own assessment.

(1) Douglas Adams; (2) Robert Adams; (3) Brian Aldiss; (4) Roger MacBride Allen; (5) Poul Anderson; (6) Piers Anthony; (7) Christopher Anvil; (8) Isaac Asimov; (9) Robert Asprin; (10) Jean Auel; (11) J.G. Ballard; (12) Steve Barnes; (13) J. Barrington Bayley; (14) Greg Bear; (15) Greg Benford; (16) Alfred Bester; (17) Lloyd Biggle Jr.; (18) David Bischoff; (19) Michael Bishop; (20) Jerome Bixby; (21) James Blish; (22) Robert Bloch; (23) Ben Bova; (24) Leigh Brackett; (25) Ray Bradbury; (26) Marion Zimmer Bradley; (27) David Brin; (28) Frederick Brown; (29) John Brunner; (30) Ed Bryant; (31) Algis Budrys; (32) Kenneth Bulmer; (33) Anthony Burgess; (34) Edgar Rice Burroughs; (35) F.M. Busby; (36) Octavia Butler; (37) Ed Byers; (38) Pat Cadigan; (39) Martin Caidin; (40) John W. Campbell; (41) Orson Scott Card; (42) Jeffrey Carver; (43) Jack Chalker; (44) A. Bertram Chandler; (45) Suzy McKee Charnas; (46) C.J. Cherryh; (47) Arthur C. Clarke; (48) J. Brian Clarke; (49) Jo Clayton; (50) Hal Clement; (51) Brenda Clough; (52) Michael Coney; (53) Lee Correy; (54) Richard Cowper; (55) Michael Crichton; (56) Ann Crispin; (57) John Crowley; (58) Jack Dann; (59) Avram Davidson; (60) L. Sprague de Camp; (61) Joseph Delaney; (62) Samuel R. Delany; (63) Lester del Rey; (64) Philip K. Dick; (65) Gordon Dickson; (66) Thomas Disch; (67) Stephen Donaldson; (68) Gardner Dozois; (69) David Drake; (70) Diane Duane; (71) George Alec Effinger; (72) Gordon Eklund; (73) Suzette Haden Elgin; (74) Harlan Ellison; (75) Dennis Etchison; (76) Philip Jose Farmer; (77) Jack Finney; (78) Bob Forward; (79) Alan Dean Foster; (80) Esther Friesner; (81) Gregory Frost; (82) Randall

Garrett; (83) David Gerrold; (84) William Gibson; (85) Alexis Gilliland; (86) Stephen Goldin; (87) William Golding; (88) Lisa Goldstein; (89) Ron Goulart; (90) Charles Grant; (91) Roland Green; (92) James Gunn; (93) Joe Haldeman; (94) Jay Haldeman; (95) Edmund Hamilton; (96) Charles Harness; (97) Harry Harrison; (98) M. John Harrison; (99) Robert Heinlein; (100) Zenna Henderson; (101) Frank Herbert; (102) Russell Hoban; (103) James Hogan; (104) Fred Hoyle; (105) L. Ron Hubbard; (106) Aldous Huxley; (107) Dean Ing; (108) James Patrick Kelly; (109) John Kessel; (110) Daniel Keyes; (111) Lee Killough; (112) Stephen King; (113) Donald Kingsbury; (114) Rudyard Kipling; (115) Damon Knight; (116) Dean Koontz; (117) C.M. Kornbluth; (118) Eric Kotani; (119) Nancy Kress; (120) Michael Kube-McDowell; (121) Katherine Kurtz; (122) Henry Kuttner; (123) R.A. Lafferty; (124) David Langford; (125) Philip Latham; (126) Keith Laumer; (127) Tanith Lee; (128) Ursula LeGuin; (129) Fritz Leiber; (130) Murray Leinster; (131) Stanislaw Lem; (132) Doris Lessing; (133) C.S. Lewis; (134) Shariann Lewitt; (135) Jacqueline Lichtenberg; (136) Frank Belknap Long; (137) Barry Longyear; (138) H.P. Lovecraft; (139) Richard Lupoff; (140) Elizabeth Lynn; (141) Anne McCaffrey; (142) Jack McDevitt; (143) Vonda McIntyre; (144) Patricia McKillip; (145) Katherine MacLean; (146) Barry Malzberg; (147) George R.R. Martin; (148) Richard Matheson; (149) Julian May; (150) Walter M. Miller; (151) Tom Monteleone; (152) Michael Moorcock; (153) C.L. Moore; (154) Janet Morris; (155) Larry Niven; (156) John Norman; (157) Andre Norton; (158) Warren Norwood; (159) Alan Nourse; (160) Kevin O'Donnell Jr.; (161) Andrew Offutt; (162) Chad Oliver; (163) George Orwell; (164) David Palmer; (165) Edgar Pangborn; (166) Alexei Panshin; (167) Mervyn Peake; (168) H. Beam Piper; (169) Frederick Pohl; (170) Jerry Pournelle; (171) Tim Powers; (172) Christopher Priest; (173)

Marta Randall; (174) Tom Reamy; (175) Mike Resnick; (176) Mack Reynolds; (177) John Maddox Roberts; (178) Keith Roberts; (179) Kim Stanley Robinson; (180) Spider Robinson; (181) Rudy Rucker; (182) Joanna Russ; (183) Eric Frank Russell; (184) Fred Saberhagen; (185) Jessica Salmonson; (186) Pamela Sargent; (187) Hilbert Schenk; (188) Stanley Schmidt; (189) Melissa Scott; (190) Bob Shaw; (191) Michael Shea; (192) Robert Sheckley; (193) Lucius Shepard; (194) Lewis Shiner; (195) John Shirley; (196) Susan Schwartz; (197) Robert Silverberg; (198) Clifford Simak; (199) John Sladek; (200) Cordwainer Smith; (201) E.E. "Doc" Smith; (202) Melinda Snodgrass; (203) Norman Spinrad; (204) Nancy Springer; (205) Steven Spruill; (206) Brian Stableford; (207) Olaf Stapledon; (208) Christopher Stasheff; (209) Bruce Sterling; (210) Marc Stiegler; (211) Theodore Sturgeon; (212) Somtow Sucharitkul; (213) Tim Sullivan; (214) Michael Swanwick; (215) James Tiptree Jr.; (216) E.C. Tubb; (217) Wilson Tucker; (218) Harry Turtledove; (219) Lisa Tuttle; (220) Jack Vance; (221) A.E. Van Vogt; (222) John Varley; (223) Jules Verne; (224) Joan Vinge; (225) Vernor Vinge; (226) Eric Vinicoff; (227) Kurt Vonnegut; (228) Karl Edward Wagner; (229) Howard Waldrop; (230) Ian Wallace; (231) Ian Watson; (232) Sharon Webb; (233) Manly Wade Wellman; (234) H.G. Wells; (235) James White; (236) Kate Wilhelm; (237) Paul Williams; (238) Walter John Williams; (239) Jack Williamson; (240) Connie Willis; (241) F. Paul Wilson; (242) Richard Wilson; (243) Robert Anton Wilson; (244) Jack Wodhams; (245) Gene Wolfe; (246) John Wyndham; (247) Nicholas Yermakov; (248) Jane Yolen; (249) Timothy Zahn; (250) George Zebrowski; (251) Roger Zelazny.

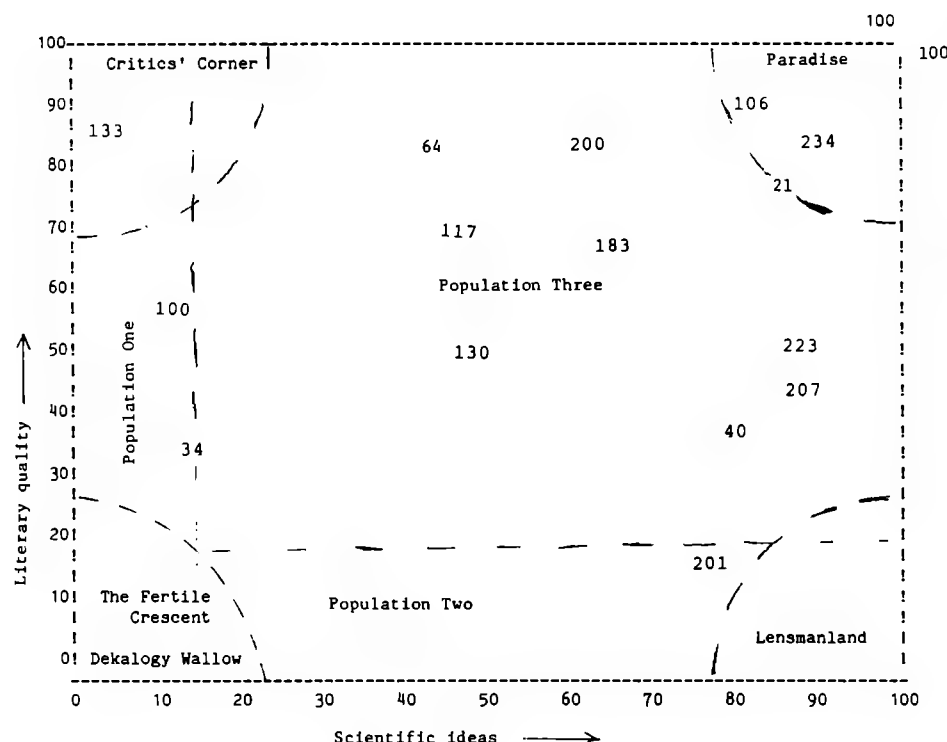
Phew!

A few words about the list: I got it by looking at award winners of past years, asking friends, dipping into science-fiction source books. I tried to stick to people who are actively producing work now, or ones who have remained in print over the years. When an author produces in many fields, I restrict my attention to the SF output. Some names given above (e.g., Kipling) may not be associated in your mind with science fiction, but they are in mine, and I don't want to get into the old argument about what defines SF. Perhaps the real unifying element of the list is that I have read works by everyone on it, and can place them on my own master diagram (but I won't necessarily tell you where).

Many writers have been overlooked. Send me a note of obvious omissions, and I will update my list. But don't write and tell me that I unforgivably left out the noted Latvian author, Gresbczwzchk. The general neglect of writers who employ neither American nor British English is intentional, since literary quality is non-Galilean (i.e. literary quality is not invariant under translation; this is a joke for Population Two readers).

Postscript

It has been pointed out to me that I left my own name off the list. Well, why not--I already know where I put myself on the diagram. But for the sake of completeness, I will add (252) Charles Sheffield. □



THE DARKNESS OF POWER: A Conversation with
**STEPHEN R.
DONALDSON**



Photo: Helen Marcus

By Nancy Kress and Paul Ferguson

Edited by Paul Ferguson and Earl Ingersoll

In the beginning there was J.R.R. Tolkien and not much else. Oh, there were other writers of fantasy: C.S. Lewis, E.R. Edison, Mervyn Peake. But none had captured the imagination of an entire generation as Tolkien had when he created Middle Earth and the Hobbits from the stuff of dreams.

And then came Stephen R. Donaldson. It may be too much to insist that Donaldson, too, has captured the imagination of a generation. After all, eight years have passed since **The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever**, the first of the two Covenant trilogies, was published. Nevertheless it is true that the Covenant novels are the most widely read fantasy novels to be published in the last 20 years. **The Wounded Land, The**

One Tree, and **White Gold Welder**, the novels constituting **The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant**, each spent several weeks on the NEW YORK TIMES best-seller list.

One reason for Donaldson's success may be that, while other writers of fantasy were busy imitating Tolkien or retelling the legend of Arthur, Donaldson was busy taking chances. His hero, a 20th-century man with the unlikely name of Thomas Covenant, is a leper whose first official act when he finds himself mysteriously transported to the magical world called The Land is to rape the young woman who befriends him. Covenant spends the remainder of the first trilogy wallowing in self-pity and trying to avoid being the legendary hero that everyone in The Land expects him to be.

All of this seems too preposterous to work, but work it does. And it works because Donaldson, creator of this preposterous world and this propostorous hero, is totally committed to his creation.

Donaldson was born in 1947 in Cleveland, Ohio, and spent most of his childhood in India, where his father worked with lepers. In fact, the idea for Thomas Covenant came from a sermon that his father delivered. Donaldson graduated from the College of Wooster in 1968, served as a conscientious

objector doing hospital work, and received his M.A. in English from Kent State University in 1971. He now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The following conversation took place March 16, 1983, during Donaldson's visit to the State University of New York, College at Brockport, where he was a guest of the Brockport Writers Forum. He spoke with Nancy Kress, Nebula Award nominee and author of three fantasy novels and a collection of short fiction, **Trinity and Other Stories** (1985), and Paul Ferguson, a former member of the college's Department of English.

Kress: What is it that leads you to write fantasy and science fiction, rather than mainstream literature?

Donaldson: That's a complicated question, and I have the feeling that I'll probably forget half the answers, because I never remember all of them at any one time. Part of it is, of course, a simple thing: writing science fiction and fantasy suits my abilities in ways that other kinds of writing do not. I wrote close to a half-million words of realistic fiction before I stumbled into doing fantasy, and although I learned a great deal about writing by doing that, none of what I wrote was very good. By that I mean that other people could read my realistic fiction and find in it what motivated me to write it in the first place. Something came to life in my abilities when I started writing fantasy. I suspect that this has a lot to do with the themes and questions that excite me; it also has to do with the sense of language and story structure I have. Since discovering that I am better at writing fantasy than anything else, I have worked up some substantial rationalizations to explain why it is more important to write fantasy. These are after-the-fact rationalizations, you understand. I didn't figure out that I would write fantasy because I had rationalized a view of literature. I rationalized a view of literature to justify writing fantasy. What I have rationalized is that fantasy is the fundamental form of literature. Certainly from a historical point of view, it constitutes the vast bulk of all literature, and it seems to me that there have to be reasons why that's true. There have to be things to be said about human experience only through recourse to the special materials of fantasy--the potential for magic, the opportunity for exotic landscapes, nonrealistic characters and creatures. Somehow or other, those materials have allowed people for 5,000 years to say things about themselves that they can't say in any other way. In the past couple hundred years of Western literature, we have evolved a very realistic mainstream literature in which we believe that it is the task of the creative artist to define and comment on what constitutes real experience, as opposed to something other that we haven't defined, but which we have left behind. That "something other" is what fantasy deals with. It is the human imagination itself which we have stopped writing about and incorporating into our view of human beings. There are many ways in which we are distrustful of the imagination; even some of our most imaginative literature expresses distrust of this aspect of being human. I write fantasy because it allows me to confront directly the part of myself that

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relates to fantasy, the part of myself that wants to read other people's fantasy, the part of me that fantasizes all the time. That part of me is a part that I don't see in any literature other than fantasy, and yet it shapes my perceptions of everything. Everything that I understand about other people's behavior, everything I do with my own experience, is controlled by the way I fantasize, the way I preview what I think will happen by using my imagination to guess about various possibilities, the way I speculate about the motivations of people around me, the way I interpret circumstances. That is fundamental to me as a person. And that is the raw substance of good fantasy novels, and it's what I miss in non-fantasy literature.

Ferguson: What difficulties did you encounter when you were trying to get the first trilogy of the *Chronicles* published?

Donaldson: There are probably a couple of things I should try to explain. I started writing fantasy at a very peculiar time in American publishing history. Tolkien with *The Lord of the Rings* had been around for some time and had been phenomenally successful for a number of years. This number of years allowed a number of publishers to try to cash in on the success of Tolkien, and they all failed miserably. What we had was a publishing world in which Tolkien was recognized as this master figure, but it had been proven that nobody could follow Tolkien, and that fantasy didn't sell, with this one exception. The publishing world generally had that kind of attitude, not just toward me but toward many others whose names are now familiar some 10 years after they also struggled to break into this field. In addition, I was a complete unknown; I had never had anything published before. I had written all kinds of stuff that will be buried with my bones, but nothing that anybody knew about. And I was starting to write an epic of 600,000 words! So it wasn't as though I was approaching publishers with a minor publishing risk. Having said all that, I have to say that they behaved in an abominable and atrocious way: They refused to accept my book. I wrote *Lord Foul's Bane* and began to submit it to American publishers. Because I was intimidated by publishing, I became very methodical in my approach and went through the alphabet starting with the A's. I submitted *Lord Foul's Bane* to every publisher of fiction in the United States, right down through the alphabet, including those who publish me now. Without exception, everybody rejected *Lord Foul's Bane*. By the time I had come to the end of the alphabet, I had come to the end of writing my trilogy, and I thought I was at an end. I had proved as conclusively as possible that I was not a good enough writer to make a career in writing. I mean, I was doing my best work, and my best work had been read by 47 professionals. The verdict of 47 professionals was unanimous--we don't want this stuff! That was an unhappy time in my life. The process took three and a half years, and I suspect I didn't handle it very well. But I found that after investing that much of myself, I simply couldn't bear to give up. So I sent away for a directory of British publishers. I had this idea that somewhere in England there was somebody who was a little more liberal-minded than American

publishers, who were all owned by conglomerates anyway and worship the bottom line. It took a while for this directory to come, and I just couldn't stand to let the manuscript sit, so pretty much on a wing and a prayer I resubmitted it to Ballantine Books. I had one reason for that: Ballantine Books published the paperback editions of *The Lord of the Rings*. That pretty much guarantees their making money, and if they are, there's at least an argument that they ought to be willing to look at my work. Then probably for the first time in five years I forgot about the book. I didn't forget about how I felt about the book, because I spent the next few months feeling sorry for myself, but I did forget about the book. What I did not know was that since the last time I had submitted *Lord Foul's Bane* to Ballantine they had fired their entire editorial staff and they had brand-new people. That accident changed my life completely. When the new editor of fantasy books at Ballantine--Lester del Rey--read *Lord Foul's Bane*, he fell in love with it immediately! He wanted to publish my books immediately! This was exactly the sort of thing he had been hired by Ballantine Books to publish. In a matter of a very few months, I had a publisher and major public attention, and the books were immensely successful as soon as they were first published. There are now 6,000,000 *Lord Foul's Banes* in print around the world. All kinds of very nice things have happened to me. We're still talking about the same book that was rejected by every fiction publisher in the United States, and somehow by some piece of divine intervention or magic or accident or whatever you use to explain life, I have gone from the bottom to the top without a discernible change in what I do. Having "looked at life from both sides now," I can honestly say that it's better to be successful.

Ferguson: How much was edited out of the original manuscript?

Donaldson: It varies from book to book. My own rewriting of *Lord Foul's Bane*, before Lester del Rey ever saw it, was pretty extensive. But in terms of editorial reworking, the most significant changes in my first trilogy were in *The Illearth War*. By the time I got to the middle of the writing of that novel, I had already collected 10 or 15 rejections, and I knew that the only thing that was going to keep me sane was the story, because I had already stopped believing that I was going to find a publisher. I got very much into the story at that time, and I took some narrative chances of a fairly substantial kind in the writing of *The Illearth War*. These chances, as it turned out, didn't pay off; they were narrative mistakes. In order to correct them, I had to do a major reorganization of that novel. For some reason, I've always been very fortunate with my third books: *The Power That Preserves* sailed through with practically no editing, and the same has been true of *White Gold Wielder*.

Kress: What is your writing routine or procedure in writing a novel?

Donaldson: Very early in my full-time writing career, I stumbled on to a very methodical daily working pattern which for some reason suited me perfectly. I am one of the most

ritualized writers I know in working method. I work exactly the same hours every day, seven to eight hours a day, five days a week, and at exactly the same times of the day. You can set your watch by the times I go to get a cup of coffee, and I drink the same number of cups a day. I listen to the same number of records a day at the same time, I read practically the same number of pages in the course of my work day. I didn't evolve this pattern consciously, but I discovered that by making writing a habit at least as rigid as brushing my teeth before I go to bed, I've come to feel as if I'm doing something wrong if I'm not writing. After you've gone through the habit of having this cup of coffee and sitting in that chair reading that and putting that record on the record player, day in and day out, and then you don't write, that really feels terrible for some reason. The habit assumes a life of its own. The result is that I'm a very productive writer who has been able to write very long books in a relatively short period of time, that I've never had writer's block, and that no matter how lousy I feel when I go into my office to work, I'm still able to work. And that means something in this business, because you overcome a lot of hurdles by moving forward, whereas if you stop to look at the hurdles you become paralyzed. So I work very mechanically and methodically--actually more in a ritualized than a mechanical way. What it comes down to is a form of self-hypnosis: One goes through these preparatory stages as a way of focusing the attention, clearing the mind of obstacles, zeroing in on what needs to be done so that when you come to work to be creative there are as few barriers as possible between your imagination and the paper. It works for me, but every writer is different.

Kress: Given that every writer is different, distilling what you've learned from your writing and publishing experience, what advice would you give to writers just starting out to write fantasy or science fiction?

Donaldson: Based on what we have just been talking about, there are certain general things you can say about writers. Generally speaking, productive writers do work predictably. The things that can be predicted vary from person to person, but they do have a system. It seems to be necessary in order for people to be regularly creative to evolve some method for controlling their sound environment, for example. You have to be surrounded by sounds that are congenial for your work. For a writer like Jack Vance, I'm told, that's family noise. He writes in his living room, and if his kids aren't playing in the living room, he can't write. For C.J. Cherryh, it's television. She watches late-night television. Of course, she doesn't actually watch it, but there's something about the sound that suits her. I listen to classical music, other people do other things. But you control your sound environment; you control privacy. You can't write if you're self-conscious; nobody can watch you write.

Kress: In addition to working methods, what other advice would you have for writers who are just now trying to break into print?

Donaldson: Based on my own experience, I

would say that the single biggest thing anyone should do is never imitate anybody else. I say that because I'm a natural-born imitator, and for years in college and graduate school, I had to wrestle with my instinct to write like so-and-so. Essentially I wanted to write Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, and it took a long time to realize that I was always going to be a cheap imitator of those guys. The only person I could be, without being a cheap imitator, was me, and I had to find somehow what was right for Donaldson. My contribution to literature would be unique, as theirs was, in that sense. That's one of the hardest things about getting into any creative field--to find the work that is right for you to do, your *metier*, your special abilities. It's particularly hard for young writers to realize that they have to get away from the books they admire most. Really admiring a book that someone else has written can cripple you, because you're always going to copy *The Lord of the Rings* or whatever it is. There comes a point where we all have to learn to be critical of what we admire most. It may have been a phase we all go through, but there certainly was a time for me when I had to feel disgusted with the literary overindulgence of Henry James, or to say that Joseph Conrad simply wasn't paying attention to the way those sentences sounded, for crying out loud! Why couldn't he realize that those words don't sound good with these words? I had to go through that, because up until then I had admired those guys so much that I couldn't write anything except what followed along behind them.

Ferguson: Maybe we could get back to the *Covenant* books more specifically. There are thousands of questions we could ask you, but I would like to ask at least one that has something to do with technique, and that is the use of names in the trilogies. Thomas Covenant's name is pretty obvious, but there are others less obvious. I'm wondering whether names came first for characters or characters came first. Also what exactly is the relationship between characters' names and your overall purposes in the two trilogies?

Donaldson: I think I should say first that I have no linguistic training or background. One of the things that's remarkable about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is that he constructed the entire language on which his characters' names are based so that there are roots and reasons of a linguistic kind for why things happen as they do in his books. Nothing like that is true for me. I make these things up pretty much by ear, although within particular categories I strive for particular things. Obviously, all of the Giants in my books have names which are compounded ordinary words, such as Saltheart Foamfollower. As a sort of historical accident, it happens that all the Ramen on the Plains of Ra have names that are extrapolations from Hindi words, because I needed a principle for consistency with their names. But these are relatively arbitrary decisions. In any particular case it can happen both ways. In the case of Saltheart Foamfollower, for example, I thought up the name long before I thought up the character. I knew that this character existing in my story was going to have this name, he was going to perform certain actions, he was

going to appear at a certain time, and he was going to be a Giant; but that was all I knew about the character until I met him. It was one of those "discovery" experiences that make people addicted to writing. This guy came sailing up the river, and I saw who he was, and I was as happy as anybody. In other circumstances it's the other way round. I had a very clear idea of what I thought the Bloodguard would be like before I attached any names to them. It just varies with the circumstances.

Ferguson: What about the Ravers?

Donaldson: I had Ravers in mind long before I had names for them, even before I had the generic name Ravers for them. I knew what I wanted them to do, and what they were generally going to be like. The fact is that they're minor characters, and they don't have much individual personality. They're bad guys, and that's about all you can say about them. That was a situation where I knew what I needed, and then I hunted around until I found names or words that felt right.

Kress: Throughout all six books, Covenant gains power, but each time he uses it he becomes bitterly distressed about the consequences, and then at the end of the sixth book *White Gold Welder* he refuses to use it at all. The same pattern is in some of your short fiction--I'm thinking now of "The Lady in White" and "The Animal Lover," in which every time a character exercises power to alter events or influence others, it doesn't turn out as well as he had hoped. The same is true of your mystery novel. Are the dangers and evils of power major concerns to you?

Donaldson: I wouldn't say that power is evil; access to power is certainly dangerous. What you're really involved in here is my sense of myself. I have a strong consciousness of my own capacity for darkness or destructiveness. I know there is a dark side to Stephen R. Donaldson, and this dark side is pretty well buried most of the time. There are very few circumstances under which it becomes apparent to anybody else. But I have enough experience to know it's there. The classic dream which I've had which dramatizes this--and I think I know of other people who have had a very similar dream--is one where you're sitting in your house and you hear the rabble in the background and you know there is a homicidal maniac loose in town and he is running around slaying and butchering people and everybody's very frightened. You go and lock all the doors, but you discover at the last minute that you forgot a bedroom window and you're running to go lock it, there's a terrible crash and the homicidal maniac comes in the bedroom window, rushes into the living room, throws himself at your throat, and turns out to be--you. You see yourself with this vicious, murderous look on your face. I'm not alone in that kind of experience, and there is a sense in which all of us do have on one level or another the capacity to be destructive, petty, hurtful, unkind, immoral. Now the kind of power we're talking about in my books is certainly a power which is accessible to both sides of the personality. It's not a case of being able to simply say, "Here is a nuclear device, and only the good side of

you gets to use it. You get to be rational and calm and constructive; you get to use all this power to make things helpful to mankind, but the bad side of you doesn't have any access to nuclear power." Nonsense! The first thing that's going to happen is that the bad side of somebody is going to get access to nuclear power, and they're going to make a bomb. Power is like that. Both sides of you get it! And it's sure tempting for the bad side to use it. The good side being rational has a fairly clear sense of the dangers; the bad side is destructive and hungry and unscrupulous, and it's very difficult to gain access to power without becoming dangerous. One of the reasons Covenant preaches, in the first trilogy, the virtues of being impotent, is that he knows if he's impotent he can't hurt anybody. It's himself he doesn't trust. Only the impotent are innocent, and only the impotent are free. But, of course, he can't be impotent. He's got this power, and he has to live as the rest of us do. We have to acknowledge both our areas of limitation and our areas of power. What he's preaching in the second trilogy is the idea that only the damned can be saved, that guilt is redemptive. Assuming that you have this power and that you cannot exercise it without in some way or other opening the door to something destructive or dangerous, so that there is guilt implicit in every act of power, then you start the quest he goes on in this second trilogy, where he hunts for an answer, a way to purify what he's trying to accomplish so that he doesn't achieve its opposite.

Kress: At the end of the second trilogy, when he does find a way to do what it is that he wants to do, it's through the sacrifice of his own life. Earlier, there have been parallels between Covenant and Christ; at one point you even have him walking on water. To what extent did you think of Covenant as the chosen of God, the one who through his own sacrifice redeems the world, as a Christ figure?

Donaldson: You must remember that I have a strong religious background. My parents were medical missionaries, I was raised in a religious school, I went to a college which required me to take a lot of religious education. It's simply not possible that I did all that stuff by accident. Of course, I thought of all those things. I certainly didn't call him Thomas Covenant in order to ignore the potential religious or symbolic implications. And I'm not ignoring those now. I will point out that what's involved here is a process of discovery of various resolutions to the problem of evil. The first that Covenant arrives at is not terribly Christian: He gets more muscle than Lord Foul, beats him up, and wins. It's the kind of thing you do with Hitler; you have to fight and there is nothing Christian about it. It's violence, and it's bloody. It may be necessary and good, but it doesn't make you a Christ figure. In the second trilogy, Covenant discovers the redemptive power of self-exposure or self-sacrifice. That is very Christian. On the other hand, it's an ongoing process, and the story has other things to do in the future, which may or may not seem so explicitly Christian. Certainly I think of my first trilogy as my existentialist trilogy, and my second as my Christian trilogy, and we'll see what happens in future work. □

About L. RON HUBBARD'S WRITERS OF THE FUTURE CONTEST

by *Algis Budrys*

Good news. L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to September 30, 1987, and even if you don't win a prize there are fresh features that could do you a lot of good.

First, there are meaningful no-strings cash prizes, and fringe benefits including recognition, encouragement, and a publication offer to the winners and some runners-up. Added have been faster reporting times, professional writing hints on your stories that *nearly* made it, and a series of invitational tuition-free special workshops for the winners and some finalists, taught by expert speculative-fiction writers. So if you're an aspiring author of fantasy or science fiction, with no more than three short stories or one novelette professionally published, here's all you do: Enter the contest.

Every three-month quarter, beginning January 1, there's a round of judging for original manuscripts up to 17,000 words. A panel of top judges then selects three winners of \$1000, \$750 and \$500. Third and Second Place also receive framed, very handsome certificates. First Place receives a trophy guaranteed to dominate almost any mantelpiece.... And while the checks are mailed to the winners quickly, the certificates and trophies are conferred at our annual Awards ceremony, to which our new writers are invited, expenses paid.

Then, from among the four quarterly First Place winners, a special panel of judges selects the winner of the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author of The Writers of The Future Story of The Year. The announcement is made at the Awards, and results in an even more elegant trophy, plus an additional \$4000.

Want some? There's no entry fee, and submitting your manuscript conveys no publication rights. (We do ask you to enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.)

What wins is any kind of good science fiction or fantasy, in the opinion of our top judges, who include Gregory Benford, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Robert Silverberg, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny.

Then there are the anthologies—*L. Ron Hubbard Presents WRITERS OF THE FUTURE Vols. I, II, and, as of early 1987, III*. I edit them for Bridge Publications, and we offer payments of up to \$1000, in addition to the Contest prizes. The anthologies—which have impressed a lot of people, including other editors and publishers—publish the winners, and some runners-up. (They also include how-to-write essays by some of our judges.)

Summing up: If your story makes it into the semi-finals, you'll get it back with a helpfully intended critique from me. If it gets into the Finals, you may get a prize or you may at least get a publication offer, and if you're in the anthology, you're automatically invited to our next workshop, where we teach idea generation, idea improvement, and career management, along with other professional skills.

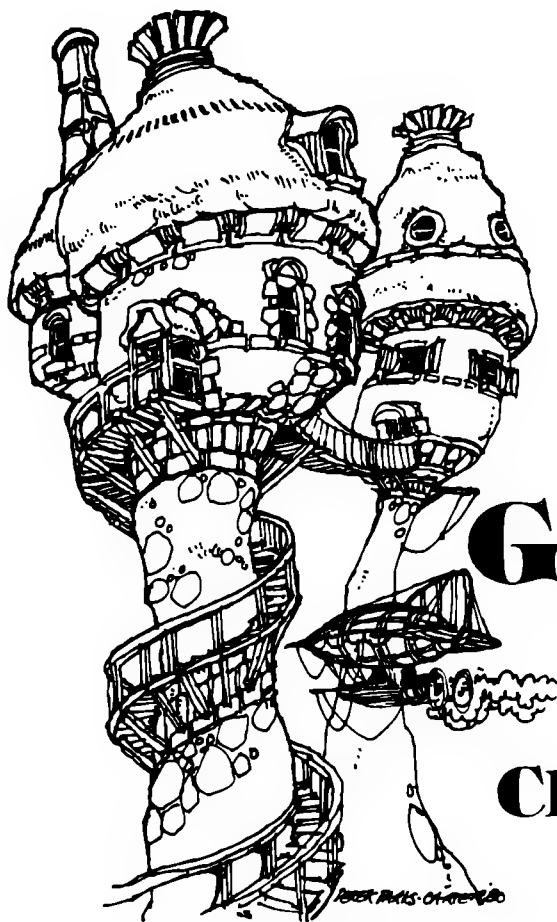
Good enough? Then you can write in for complete entry rules, or you can just go ahead and submit a manuscript, to:

*L. Ron Hubbard's
Writers of The Future Contest
PO Box 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90078*

A rational approach would be to borrow or buy the anthologies and study them. (The first two have an obsolete Contest address in them, but the mail will be forwarded.) They're \$3.95 paperbacks, and you might as well see what you've been missing.

Meet you at the Awards?

—*Algis Budrys*



NEWS FROM THE GHETTO

Charles Platt

THE INSANITY OFFENSE

The case sounded ridiculous. Harlan Ellison, interviewed by Gary Groth for *THE COMICS JOURNAL* in 1979, had made a few offhand comments about Michael Fleisher, author of the notoriously violent *SPECTRE* series for DC Comics. Ellison said the series was "bugfuck;" you had to be crazy like Robert E. Howard or H.P. Lovecraft to write like that. Fleisher said he was "devastated and appalled" by Ellison's remarks, and he decided to sue for libel.

Late in 1986, the case finally reached Southern Federal District Court in Manhattan. Judge Vincent Broderick's court room, on the 27th floor, was smaller and more intimate than I'd expected. I wandered in on November 12 (jury selection had occurred on the 10th, and the 11th had been a holiday) and had to pick my way between lawyers and defendants sitting on ancient green-vinyl-upholstered chairs, ranged around three big wooden tables in the center of the room. As I sat down in one of four plywood pews reserved for (nonexistent) visitors, the prosecuting counsel had just started making his opening statement.

Attorneys can say whatever they like in opening and closing statements, which are not regarded as evidence and are thus exempt from the strict procedural rules that are observed while interrogating witnesses. Fleisher's attorney told the jury of five women and four men that Ellison was "a controversial person. Controversial people stir up trouble, they attract attention.... Not only does he not deny this, he markets it." As for *THE COMICS JOURNAL*, it was an "elitist, muckraking"

magazine; "every time you open it up you can find some kind of hate, some kind of argument." Their transcript of Ellison's five-hour interview was "nasty, hostile and attacking." Ellison attacked John Wayne and he attacked John Updike; but he attacked Michael Fleisher worst of all. The libel supposedly consisted of three separate statements:

First, Ellison described Fleisher as crazy, certifiable, twisted, derange-o, bugfuck and a lunatic.

Second, Ellison (mis)quoted a *PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY* review as having said that *Chasing Halry*, a book by Fleisher, was "the product of a sick mind." In fact, the review had said no such thing.

Third, Ellison said that Fleisher's *SPECTRE* series had been discontinued by DC Comics because "they realized they had turned loose a lunatic on the world." In other words, DC had killed Fleisher's series because they thought he was mentally unbalanced.

As a result of these statements, Fleisher's "business reputation has been destroyed." The attorney summed up: "Freedom of speech doesn't go this far. There is no protection for lies that are knowingly published." As compensation, he was asking for total damages of \$2 million from Ellison, Groth, and *THE COMICS JOURNAL*.

After lunch, the defense attorney for Groth took his turn. He claimed that Fleisher's income had actually doubled in the years following the supposed destruction of his career; that Fleisher had described himself as "a lunatic" in an interview that he gave some other magazine; and Fleisher's work was indeed deranged. For instance, in one of his comic-book stories, "The Night of the

Chicken," a farmer picked up a prostitute in a bar, got her to dress up in a chicken costume, hacked her to pieces with an ax, then fed her to his chickens. And Fleisher had stated that out of all his stories, this was one of the three he was most proud of.

As for *Chasing Halry*, his novel that had been reviewed in *PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY*, it described the adventures of two foul-minded men acting out their hatred for women. (In a deposition under oath, Fleisher had explained that "hairy" refers to "pussy.") At the climax, after getting a female hitchhiker to participate in "unnatural sex acts," they poured gasoline over her in the back seat of a car, set light to it and watched the explosion scatter her parts across the landscape. But Ellison hadn't been condemning Fleisher when he said this sort of stuff was "crazy" and "bugfuck." On the contrary, he was praising it. "Bugfuck," the defense claimed, was a word Ellison used to describe people he admired. He even used it on himself. At other times (the attorney said) Ellison had happily described himself as "crazy as a bedbug."

So Ellison had described himself as crazy; and Fleisher had described himself as crazy; but the trouble started when Ellison said Fleisher was crazy.

In case the jury might think that there wasn't much to choose between the behavior of these two mature adults, Ellison's attorney tried to elevate the proceedings to a higher plane. He reminded the jury of the vital importance of writers who take a radical stance. The work of Thoreau, after all, was a powerful influence on Gandhi, who liberated a whole continent from colonial oppression. Gandhi, in turn, inspired Martin Luther King, whose marches through the South ushered in liberation for American blacks. And guess who participated in those marches? Why, none other than Harlan J. Ellison! (It so happened that of the nine jurors listening to this homily, three were black.) Ellison, like Thoreau, was a brilliant writer, who had won every imaginable award for excellence in his field. Yes, he was outspoken sometimes—even using hard-hitting language like "bugfuck"—but that's the way great radicals are. He certainly shouldn't be confused with mere comic-book writers.

The implication was that from his lofty literary plane, Ellison knew little of comicdom; consequently, he couldn't have known that what he said about Fleisher wasn't true; and without deliberate untruth, or reckless disregard for truth, there could be no libel. (More on the definition of libel in a moment.)

Fleisher's lawyer didn't buy this. He didn't think Ellison was as naive about comics as he made out, and the next day he had Ellison on the witness stand, admitting that in fact he had received as much as \$3,000 for being a celebrity at comics conventions, had written comics scripts himself for both Marvel and DC, and had often allowed his stories to be adapted for comics.

At this point, the attorney took out a stack of lurid magazines whose paper had turned yellow during the years it had taken for the legal machinery to bring this case to trial. Wasn't it true that Ellison once planned to adapt a story he co-wrote titled "Would You Do It for a Penny?"

Imagine, if you will, the confusion in the mind of a juror at this point. There you are, a

retired subway token-booth clerk, perhaps, or an insurance salesman. You walk into the court and discover it's not a murder case, not even a drug bust. One writer is suing another writer for stating he's insane. The term "writer" makes you think of poets, perhaps, or bestselling novelists. But no; it turns out that Fleisher used to write comic books describing motorcycle gangs, zombies and psychopaths chopping women to pieces with axes and power saws. He's the one sitting meekly at the table nearest the judge--a shy, stooping, self-effacing man with glasses and thick bushy hair, like the protagonist in the movie *Eraserhead*. The other writer, Ellison, is wearing a dark blue blazer with gold buttons, like an elderly diplomat, or something out of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. His gray hair is immaculately coiffed, and he has an air of grim detachment, as if he can't believe he's being forced to associate with such lowlifes. Ellison's attorney lists Ellison's literary awards, claims he's even helped to liberate the American Negro, for heaven's sake. But--now Ellison's on the witness stand, and Fleisher's attorney is showing him back issues of "Heavy Metal" magazine, and a comic called "Creepy," and he's saying, "Is this your story, here? Did you write this?" And Ellison is reluctantly agreeing that he did. So you, the juror, begin to wonder: How can it be that this latter-day Thoreau has sold his stuff to the same kind of sleazoid publications that printed Fleisher's sicko stories about people getting hacked into a bloody pulp?

Harlan Ellison wouldn't agree, and most science-fiction readers wouldn't agree, but to the outsider, comics, horror, and science fiction are all much the same: They all use lurid images to give kids cheap thrills. Is Ellison's award winning story "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" really that much better than Fleisher's "Night of the Chicken"? Maybe it's better written, and maybe it has an implicit social message, but to the outsider, it looks as if we're making microscopic distinctions between two grades of trash.

This case initially promised to be a serious test of a respected writer's legal right to express trenchant literary criticism. As I sat there, however, listening to the list of absurd story titles and the asinine, inaccurate personal epithets that had been exchanged, the veneer of respectability began to seem totally bogus. Science-fiction people have a notorious tendency to take themselves too seriously, and here they were all dressed up in business suits, paying attorneys thousands of dollars a day to make them sound impressive, while the case seemed little better than a name-calling competition.

I'm not questioning anyone's sincerity. As I continued attending the trial, I began to realize that Michael Fleisher had been genuinely distressed by the "crazy" epithet. Fleisher was unwilling to talk to me--he recoiled in seeming horror when I first introduced myself and said I might write something about the case. But as the days wore on, the artificial environment of fluorescent ceiling panels, acoustic tile, scuffed plywood paneling and wrinkled brown carpet seemed to close in around us all, so that, like hostages who learn to love their captors, everyone developed a kind of guarded camaraderie. I finally filched a copy of Fleisher's novel from one of the defense

attorneys and found, contrary to the way it had been described, it was a carefully considered, perceptive book about the inhumanity of common men--the kind of novel, in fact, that Harlan Ellison claims to write himself, yet never seems to publish. PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY did not, as Ellison stated, call it "the product of a sick mind" that was "so twisted and nauseating, it has absolutely no redeeming social value." They said simply that it was "a very ugly book" about "hideous sexism." Personally, I found it no more hideous than the realities it rather objectively described.

So Michael Fleisher wasn't a mere comics hack, and he did feel genuinely wronged, and he had genuinely suffered, despite the best efforts of the defense attorneys to portray him as a venal, perverted opportunist.

When it comes down to it, though, proof of libel doesn't depend on the personalities of the people involved, or even on emotional distress. Four circumstances must exist: A defamatory statement must have been made (that is, a statement likely to subject a person to ridicule and abuse among friends or co-workers); the statement must have been false (which everyone admitted in this case--no one was questioning Fleisher's sanity); the person who made the statement must have known it was false or must have acted with reckless disregard for the truth (that is, with actual doubts as to truth, and awareness of probability of falsity); and actual injury must have occurred to the reputation of the victim (not just his personal feelings).

Only after libel has been established can damages be assessed. These can then reflect any distress that may have occurred.

In this case, libel never was established. Finally, on the afternoon of December 5, after four weeks of tiresome quibbles between lawyers, scurrilous attacks on the integrity of witnesses, half-truths delivered under oath, mountains of Xeroxed documents showered upon the jury, and a final summation by the judge that took most of one morning and referred repeatedly to "Harvey" Ellison, the jury stayed out less than 90 minutes before acquitting Ellison, Groth, and THE COMICS JOURNAL on all counts.

In a sense, it was the right decision. The case seemed personally important to Michael Fleisher, but to everyone else it seemed silly. Henry Holmes, Ellison's second attorney, who flew in from Los Angeles for some of the proceedings, said that on the West Coast no judge would have accepted the case for trial in the first place.

But consider the four circumstances for establishing libel. In my opinion (which I can state freely, since opinions based on public facts are generally exempt from libel) Ellison's statement was defamatory, it was false, and it was made with reckless disregard for the truth. Ellison himself almost admitted as much, in the interview itself: After describing Fleisher as "certifiable," he added, "that's a libelous thing to say." Under cross-examination in court, he claimed that remark had just been a joke; but Fleisher's lawyer suggested Ellison realized, at that moment in the interview, he had "gone too far," which sounded about right to me. Moreover, after the interview was published and protests were received from various other people it mentioned, Ellison referred to his

own general "unnecessary vitriol" in a letter to Gary Groth, and added (in a rare moment of contrition) "I am unsettled. I am remorseful. I must watch my mouth."

The fourth requirement for proving libel--injury to Fleisher's reputation--was harder to demonstrate. As Ellison's attorney put it, "If someone is injured in his professional reputation, it will show up on their income-tax return." Fleisher's returns showed an increase in gross writing income from about \$27,000 in 1979 to \$50,000 in 1983. Moreover, in at least one instance, Fleisher seemed to benefit from his notoriety. Sometime after Ellison's interview compared his craziness to that of Robert E. Howard, Fleisher was commissioned to script a Conan comic.

On the other hand, as Fleisher put it, "I found myself having difficulties with my work that I had not experienced before ... I was unable to produce the plots that I was required to do.... It's intrusive to go through life dealing with people ... who've been given the impression that you're some sort of lunatic." There was indeed evidence that his professional colleagues no longer viewed him the same way, especially after THE COMICS JOURNAL started publicizing his lawsuit and ridiculing it. As his attorney put it, "month after month they used his name to promote their magazine and to mock him." At one point they even mailed invitations that said, "One of the reasons we're giving this party is because we're making Michael Fleisher so unhappy." Nor were they entirely fair when they gleefully described Fleisher's novel *Chasing Hairy* as "the most repulsive piece of fiction ever written in English." One could only admire their prescience, however, when in an advertisement for a back issue they said, "Bet you this turns up in some legal paper." The ad itself was offered as an exhibit by the prosecution.

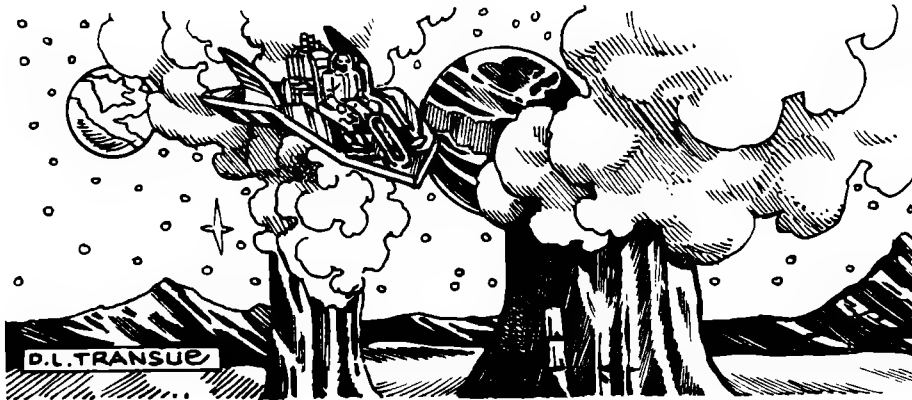
Personally, I don't believe in libel laws, because the only kind of printed statement that really hurts is one that exposes truth, and in the United States, truth cannot be libelous. People sue for libel when someone offends their dignity, or when they take a statement more seriously than it was intended. If Michael Fleisher had been able to laugh at Ellison's accusations, people would have soon forgotten them. By choosing to sue, Fleisher ended up attracting the notoriety that he originally sought to avoid.

So I feel Fleisher was wrong to bring his suit, and I ventured to tell him this in person. But having brought it, it seemed to me that he should have won it.

In a way, justice was still done. Fleisher refused to say how much the case had cost him, but I suspect a large part of his legal costs were to have been paid on a contingency basis--that is, his attorney didn't receive the full fee unless he managed to win damages.

By contrast, Ellison, Groth, and THE COMICS JOURNAL had to pay their four attorneys at least \$150 an hour, win or lose. Insurance may have covered some of the magazine's expenses, but Ellison was telling people that the case had cost him \$85,000. Perhaps this will be an incentive for him to speak a little more circumspectly in his next interview--or, at least, check some of the facts before publication. □

ESSAYING



David Bischoff

STARDATE: THE MAGAZINE

"Dave," said Ted White, dealing another hand of cards, "if you've got a minute after the game, I'd like to talk to you about something that will probably be of great interest to you."

I'd just gotten back from a week in Florida. It was March 1985. I was finishing up a space opera novel, and rather burned out on writing, so when the poker winnings were drawn in and the losses tallied there at the Friday night session at Michael Nally's store, Hole in the Wall Books, I certainly was ready to be interested in something.

"Dave," said Ted, after relishing the suspense he'd created, "would you be interested in becoming the editor of a glossy science-fiction magazine that has *Star Trek* elements, but mostly will feature straight-ahead SF stories and articles?" I blinked. "But Ted. You're the editor. You've got the experience. . . ."

"Well, Dave," said Ted sheepishly, "I don't think I can really be the editor of a magazine that features *Star Trek* and gaming, and probably *Doctor Who*, by the way. You know I despise *Star Trek* and I know precious little about the others. . . . But I've been offered the position of editorial director, and I think that you'd be perfect as editor."

I wasn't sure at first. I had books to finish, and I had other projects in mind, including an ambitious mainstream novel with Charles Sheffield called *The Judas Cross*. But after an interview with Dana Lombardy, the man who had initially offered Ted the position, I thought that something special might be bubbling here.

Seems that Dana, a classically warped "gamer" with much experience with both marketing and gaming who had been doing the game column for *ANALOG* and *ASIMOV'S* for years, had fallen in with this millionaire

from Delaware, one LaMott DuPont Copeland, and had talked him into establishing the seeds of what could become a magazine empire. Or such were the ambitions at the time. Dana's comrade in this was a man who wanted to start a magazine called *HUMOR NEWS*. Dana wanted to create a magazine called *GAME NEWS*. When Ted and I came into the picture, both had been launched. *GAME NEWS* was very good. . . . slick, professional, lots of great material. But *HUMOR NEWS* looked rocky. Dana needed another magazine, and saw great possibilities in an already established magazine call *STARDATE*, created by FASA, a game company that had the licensing to create a *Star Trek* role-playing game and a *Doctor Who* role playing game. FASA had already produced six issues, all of which had sold reasonably well in specialty shops. Dana thought that by adding professional fiction and graphics to the central aspect of this magazine, i.e. scenarios for the FASA games, a successful mass-market magazine could be launched.

I was impressed by Dana Lombardy, who eventually proved to be a model "boss," a hard-working manager with vision, who nonetheless treated his "employees" as equals, working toward a common goal. I was also impressed that he offered a reasonable salary and perquisites in return for a very elastic work schedule. In other words, I could still write my own ticket. But something else was happening. . . . an ambition I never even knew I had was percolating in my subconscious: to be an editor. An SF editor.

When I was a teen-ager, I'd played with the idea of publishing a fanzine. However, I had a problem. For one thing, I was quite

aware that I wasn't yet the writer I wanted to be. Also, I was quite lazy. To do a fanzine, you have to do everything from typing stencils to printing the things. This kind of work just didn't appeal to me. Nonetheless, as my wont, I daydreamed. The magazine was going to be called *JADAWIN*, after a Philip Jose Farmer hero. Not only would it contain my own pithy comments on the SF scene, but articles and fiction by the best fan and pro writers and artists.

There was something truly ethereal about this notion that was nothing like my fantasies in regard to fiction writing. The smell of the fresh print? The touch of paper, the pleasures of well-drawn pictures, the sharpness of spiffy graphics? I think these were nibbling on my mind, but there was something else there, a sense of creative control reaching beyond mere stringing together of words and concepts.

Anyway, college and part-time jobs soon submerged that desire, and subsequent success with stories and novels charted a different course. Although I did edit a couple of books of SF stories for young people, called *Strange Encounters* and *Quest*, I was not exactly prompted to rush to New York City and become a book or magazine editor. Many business and personal visits there had convinced me that though I was fascinated with that city and cared for many of its inhabitants, there was something very numbing, perhaps even crushing there for me in the professional world. I'd also maintained that the perfect publishing world would be if the book and magazine offices of New York were transferred to the more provincial Washington, D.C.

But suddenly here was a wonderful opportunity to have my cake and eat it.

For a while, it was even better in some ways than I had imagined it would be.

Not that it was easy. The morning I walked in, I was shown to an empty office by Dana, given the obligatory typewriter, phone and office supplies, then essentially was left to get down to business, while the others in the two-floor office scurried about, working on *GAME NEWS*. Well, I'd never edited a magazine before, so the first thing I did was to watch the other people doing their particular jobs, and take what instruction I could from Dana. Fortunately, Dana Lombardy is very organized, and I already had a structure to work with. I knew the dates the stories and articles and art would be due. I just had to figure out how to get them, then know what to do with them once I got them.

I met the staff I'd be working with, including Sharon Hart, the art director, and Wendy Mannis, the assistant editor. They were the key in-house people coordinating the physical and printed aspects of the magazine--in other words, the people who along with their associates, did the hard work. I learned how they functioned on *GAME NEWS*, and began to get an idea of how *STARDATE* would work. Along with the ad people, the office manager (who eventually would be Heather Bryden) and Dana Lombardy, within about six months I learned a great deal about professional magazine publishing.

It was about the second week of familiarization with things at the office the I realized why I had been hired. I had the contacts. I knew who to call to get the

information and material that was needed. Dana and company knew how to put together a magazine, but not a science-fiction magazine. Ted White had some great ideas for the way the magazine should look, and was a tremendous help in giving me the basic lessons in editing a magazine. But everything else fell on my shoulders.

This was when I started to get excited. Here was something I could, with the talents and hard work of others, mold toward a personal vision. Magazines are different from novels in that once you've done a novel, you have to let it be and create another novel. With magazines you can change and improve with every issue, working toward what is right for you and, more importantly, what is right for your market, your readers.

Granted, I don't think I'd like to have had *Star Trek* role-playing game material in my ideal SF magazine--but by golly if it was going to sell copies, and I could influence it enough so that it looked good, and was quality stuff, then I was all for it. We retained the services of Dale Kemper from the previous *STARDATE* incarnation to obtain this material for us until I got a handle on it. I started to solicit the services of regular contributors, including Charles Platt and Ed Naha, for features. I sent out a market notice to SFWA members, *LOCUS* and *SF CHRONICLE* so that we would start receiving submissions. I commissioned art from SF illustrators, and educated Sharon Hart in what was available. (Sharon caught on within weeks and did a simply wonderful job.)

I started to learn that it was going to be necessary to create an SF magazine that was somehow different from the others, and the cornerstone of this proved to be the concept that became our subtitle: *THE MULTI-MEDIA MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION*. We would be slick, we would pay our writers high rates, we would have pictures--but most importantly, we would be a magazine that examined and celebrated the way SF has influenced our culture. We would have comics, and great drawings and photos to complement our features. We would discuss science fiction in all its facets.

With this format, plus coverage of *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* utilizing top-notch critics and fiction writers (the idea was to use our Paramount license to publish *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* short stories by top name people, which would later be published as a single volume by Pocket Books) our contacts in the industry projected a very satisfying circulation within two years.

Dana Lombardy instructed Ted on one aspect of most importance: We should create a magazine and have fun and fulfillment in doing it.

Fun? Oh yeah, I had lots of fun. First off, I didn't have to get up early in the morning. I could get up between 10 and 11 and do a few hours of writing, then catch the Metro downtown. Sure, sometimes I had to spend the whole day at the office... but some days I didn't even go in. There wasn't any problem at all in taking off two weeks to go to France and England to research *The Judas Cross*. Upon arriving at the office, it was non-stop phone calls, letter-writing, meetings and what-have-you with the always stimulating staff. In fact, by the time I got home at about eight in the evening, I was incredibly wired with the happenings of the

day. For a guy who had spent most of his professional life doodling on a keyboard, or motivating himself to get out of bed to do the same, this was heady, invigorating stuff indeed.

Fulfillment?

Oh yes, when those issues came back, when I knew they were real, when I could show them to other people with pride, that was very fulfilling.

Sounds great, doesn't it? I mean, it should have worked out. If you've seen the four issues we produced, each better than the previous, all pretty good and above all professional efforts, you'll agree that we looked like a sure thing. Even skeptical I was won over, swept up in the excitement. I was forming a vision, you see, of what a great science-fiction magazine should be... and that vision was starting to come into focus.

I mean, we've got some damned good illustrators these days whose work was either getting the shaft from poor printing, or who were not encouraged to be at all adventurous. I mean, much of science fiction has been boring me for a long time, and here was an opportunity to publish stuff that I thought was worthwhile. I mean, here's a field that takes itself entirely too seriously and could do with a journal filled with well-written articles and stories and exciting graphics. There was--and there is--a niche for the type of magazine that *STARDATE* would have become.

The truth, alas, is that we were doomed from the beginning and didn't know it. Doomed, you ask, by the Secret Masters of Prodom or Fandom? No. I must admit we weren't exactly welcomed into the SF community with a great deal of excitement. But then so many magazines have come and gone that perhaps skepticism was in order. Doomed, you ask, by a lack of interest from readers and distributors? No, we were gearing up for quite an upsurge in circulation. Doomed, you ask, by a bad staff? No, far from it. We had a great staff. I've never seen people work together better in my life. By the end of 1985, everything seemed to be working like well-oiled machinery. And with the excellent help of Stephen P. Brown as a reader, I was able to handle just about everything, including a continuing career as a book writer.

No, the problem was with Associates International Inc. LaMott DuPont Copeland was not quite as well-off as it seemed. In fact, he was a millionaire--but only on paper. As I understand it, Mr. Copeland actually operates from a trust fund. So that while he in fact is the beneficiary of many millions of dollars, he only gets the interest... a mere few million a year.

And his business, Associates International Inc., apparently should not have ventured into a couple of new magazines. Oh, it was no stranger to publishing. It owned a typesetting operation and quite a few trade journals, and perhaps other operations. But it was not as financially solvent as it could have been. So when paychecks started bouncing in February 1986, Dana journeyed to the home office in Wilmington, Delaware, and there he was told to start closing things down, suspend publication and try to sell the magazines. Associates International was desperately trying to regroup in order to prevent itself from going under.

I've had a very hard time writing this piece,

and it gets even more difficult at this point in the story. By the end of the year, I figured we were well on our way toward our goals. We had just gone monthly. More good manuscripts were coming in. Artists were calling us, wanting to see their work printed in *STARDATE*. Sure, the cash flow seemed a little weird at times, but then this was publishing, wasn't it? Publishing, I knew from previous experience, is not the greatest industry for getting your checks on time.

When everything fell apart, it was rather shattering for me, especially since I had just sent out a sample copy of the latest issue to the members of SFWA, soliciting subscriptions and submissions and smugly announcing that I thought *STARDATE* was going to make it. I had developed visions in spades, matching more or less the ambitions of Dana Lombardy, who wanted to do a whole bunch of magazines. I was hoping a fantasy magazine with similar slants and qualities would be down the pike, after *STARDATE*'s success. Ted White was already planning a series of comics. Ah yes, dreams upon dreams, splendid rainbows of them...

I truly enjoyed being an editor, and discovered something uniquely creative in that position, a kind of joy that authors didn't get. It was the pleasure of spouting off ideas like a machine gun, and letting others implement them. It was the thrill of getting back a story that I had requested a rewrite for, and finding that my suggestions really worked. It was the roller coaster warmth and anxiety of dealing with people every day in a business that mattered to me. And yes, I suppose there is in any editorial position an odd sense of power and control. I enjoyed the expense account, and the sense of representing something greater than simply my own work. People depended upon me to do my best: The fate of a magazine hung upon my abilities and my decisions.

Best of all, there was a great deal of immediate feedback involved. By the time a book or short story has been published, you're busy working on another project you're much more excited about. At a magazine, the creative process gets almost immediate gratification or necessary criticism.

So the process of closing the magazine was rather like taking weeks to bury a corpse. As of this writing, I have yet to be paid by Associates International for those weeks, as well as for other magazines they owe me for. Quite a few artists and writers are owed money as well. Dana Lombardy himself is owed a bundle.

So the question Ted White put to me after the debacle was: "Well Dave, are you sorry you got involved with *STARDATE*?"

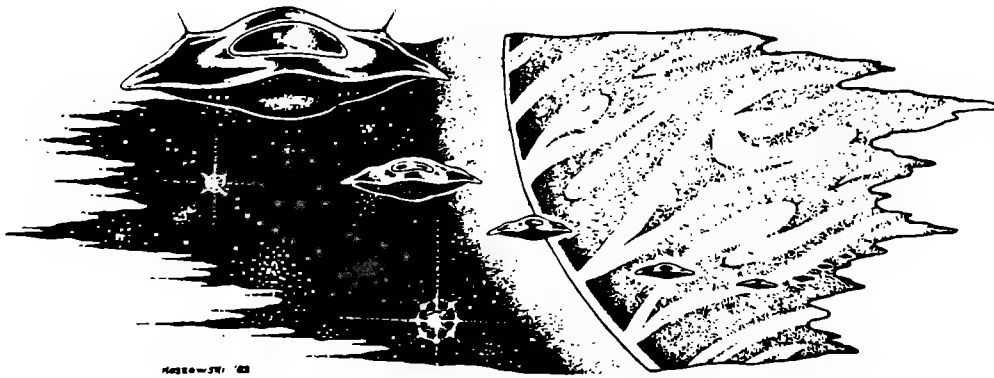
Nope, Ted, not at all. I've still got the wounds, but I've still got the memories--and the magazines--to prove that we really were on the way to becoming a genuinely viable science-fiction magazine. A magazine that would, I believe, have influenced the course of SF history... but more importantly, a magazine that would have been a hell of a lot of fun.

I often said to myself during those last four months before the rug got pulled, as the magazines began to come together and everyone started to become interested in *STARDATE*, this is too much fun, too good to be true!

And it was.

□

WORDS & PICTURES



movie reviews

by Darrell Schweitzer

Hollywood science fiction is still on the level of the comic book, but I think it's an adult comic book. That is, the science and logic may be strictly comic-book level, but the movies work emotionally for adults, not just for the kiddies.

Case in point is **Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home** (Paramount), wherein the aging Usual Cast save the Earth from its own anti-environmental foolishness. The premise of this film, on the crudest level, is that it's a bad idea to kill off the whales because the whales have powerful friends.

A gigantic alien space-probe arrives at Earth and begins zapping the oceans with a beam of energy so awsome powerful that it is vaporizing the atmosphere--and the oceans. This, it transpires, is a device sent by a vastly superior civilization which has suddenly lost touch with the whales, extinct in the 23rd century, and has decided to check up on them. Like some Lovecraftian Elder God, the probe pursues its own ends without even recognizing the existence of mankind, and is, as an incidental side effect, threatening all life on the planet, not to mention nearby space, since it sucks all the power out of unwary spaceships that come too near. Never mind that, even if there were still whales on the Earth, a beam that vaporizes the oceans wouldn't be a sensible way to say "Hi!" If you can explain that, you can explain how whale songs carry over interstellar distances, presumably beyond the bounds of Federation space, since the world of the superwhales has yet to be discovered. Enter the Usual Crew, with Spock still a bit woozy after having been dead and reconstituted, bound for Earth in a captured Klingon ship. Admiral Kirk (soon to be assistant, sub-deputy dishwasher Kirk in any sensible space navy) is coming back to face the music after the, ah, irregularities that took place in

the last movie. He quickly sizes up the situation, and after all of 30 seconds of investigation, decides that the only sensible thing to do is to pop back to the late 20th century and pick up a couple of humpback whales, so they can reply to the alien signal and shut that damn beam off.

Of course they do. But the surprising part is that they do it with a considerable amount of wit and charm. There are some lovely time-travel jokes, including the befuddled Spock trying to master the 20th-century profanity and Kirk trying to pass Spock off as a burned-out hippie. ("He was part of the free speech movement back in the '60s. He took a little too much LDS." "LDS?" a 20th century romantic figure sensibly wonders.) There is even a literary joke. ("They all talk like that. You can tell from the writings of the period, like the collected works of Jacqueline Susann or Harold Robbins." "Yes, the masters.") There are also moments of genuine suspense, and for all the budget for this movie may well have been decreased (the usual fate of a later sequel), we're treated to some striking visuals. I particularly like the scene in which Sulu, flying a helicopter, lowers a sheet of super-plexiglass (for the whale tank) into the cargo bay of the Klingon ship, which has landed in the middle of a San Francisco park. The ship is invisible, so there is Mr. Scott going about his business, standing in the air, while the plexiglass is lowered down and disappears. (Never mind that this huge, invisible spaceship hasn't been run into by a single jogger. Picky, picky.)

It's all in great fun, and a sure crowd-pleaser, despite its superficiality. The serious ecological theme is treated superficially. (Let's face it, we don't have to imagine that whales are vastly wise intelligences to justify preserving them.) The potentially interesting subplot of Spock's

attempt to reintegrate human and alien aspects into a coherent personality just seems to conveniently resolve itself. And there's a painfully obvious sub-subplot in which Checkov is sent to steal some subatomic particles (good old comic-book physics!) and, when caught, is taken for a spy because he happens to be Russian. All the characterizations are shallow, and were it not for the fast pace and clever time-travel jokes, the audience might notice just how insubstantial this movie is.

There will be more, of course. This movie serves the same function as "The Adventure of the Deserted House" in the Sherlock Holmes series--it sets everything back up, so the series can go on indefinitely. Kirk is made a captain of a starship again, and the new starship is named, you guessed it, Enterprise.

Give this one about a "B". Leonard Nimoy directed. The screenplay is by Steve Meerson, Peter Krikes, Harve Bennett and Nicholas Meyer. Bennett is also the producer. The "story," which I suppose is the treatment, is by Bennett and Nimoy.

The Fly: No Barf Bag Left Unfilled

I am beginning to have a bit more respect for David Cronenberg. The man still struggles to find a whole new Aesthetic of the Repulsive and is, to the rest of us, the most thoroughly tasteless filmmaker since Andy Warhol, but he is getting more competent as a director. I mean, after **Scanners**, the only way to go was up. Sure, I know that some people actually think well of **Scanners**, but I saw it too, and I did so in the company of a whole test audience of fans who broke up laughing at the numerous idiocies, so I still find it hard to class **Scanners** much above **Robot Monster** or **Teen-agers From Outer Space**. But **The Dead Zone** showed glimmerings of real talent. I was very pleasantly surprised.

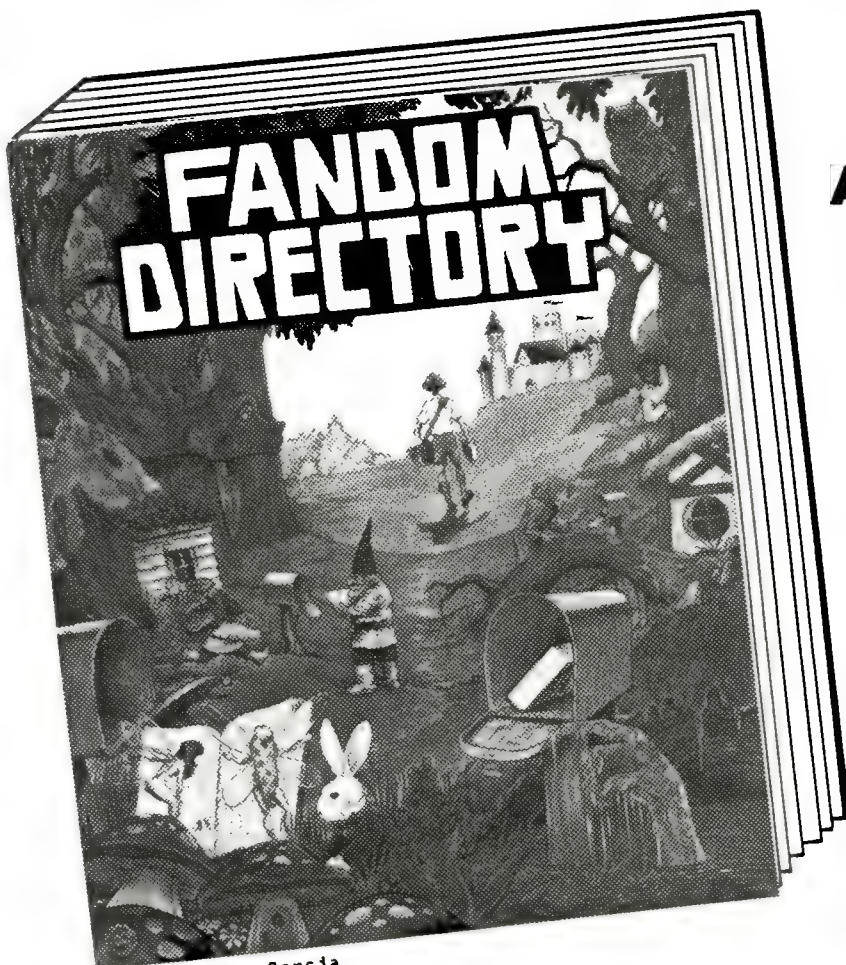
Of course the tastelessness is still there. At every possible opportunity, Cronenberg zooms in on wounds and ripping fingernails and oozing pus, and most of the outcries from the audience are reactions of disgust. (The audience is nearly as noisy as that of **Allens**, but they don't seem to be having as much fun.) He even parodies the whole syndrome, when the fly-man vomits onto his food in order to digest it outside of his body (the way a real fly does) and remarks laughingly, "That's disgusting!"

In fact, there is only one apparent lapse in tastelessness, in which a particularly nauseating effect is deliberately kept off camera--so it can be shown in full to greater effect at the climax.

There are only three things that make this watchable at all. The performances by all the principals are excellent (Jeff Goldblum as the fly-man, Gena Davis as his ladyfriend, John Getz as her nasty boss), and the characterizations are genuinely subtle and build up very real sympathy as the nerdy researcher first wants to impress his lover, then tries to reach out to her as he is rapidly changing into something inhuman. She is his link to humanity and this relationship makes the film work. Finally well-placed bits of humor often get us past the gross parts.

Even the science makes minimal sense. In the 1950s version, the human and fly molecules get mixed up in the teleporter. If

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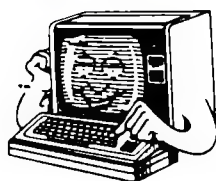
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MO. YR

Signature _____

you think about it, that should have meant that the man came out with a fly shaped wart in some delicate place, since there wouldn't be a lot of fly molecules to go around. But in the new version, the teleportation device's computer gets confused by the presence of two creatures in the chamber and splices them together on a genetic level.

So, this is a better than average movie, but not for the faint-of-stomach. Not for animal lovers either, I might add, because at one point Cronenberg treats us to a full view of a still-living baboon that has been teleported inside out.

The guy is creative, no doubt, but, alas, he lacks two technical advantages enjoyed by horror film directors of the past: censorship and black-and-white.

Television

There is a surprisingly large amount of fantasy-interest TV on of late. The local Philadelphia stations have their share of reruns, and so I must confess my secret vice--I dote on **The Addams Family** and watch it daily, although I've seen it all before. I'm still waiting for the Margaret Hamilton Halloween episode in which she almost reprises her **Wizard of Oz** witch role. My favorite so far is the wonderful **Pirate Treasure/ PegLeg Addams** episode, which contains that immortal line of dialog (after Gomez's watch has just rung like a ship's bell): "Eight bells. I think I'll go aft and shiver me timbers."

I also watch **One Step Beyond**, a nearly forgotten show from the '50s which I think of as **Superstition Theatre**, since its heavy-handed, pseudo-factual approach reminds me of the similarly primitive **Science Fiction Theatre**. **One Step Beyond** was sort of a second-rate **Twilight Zone** (though it came first) which occasionally stumbled onto a powerful image or situation. I was particularly taken with the sinister, idiot clown in one episode who appears to be strangling the guilty protagonist's reflection in a car's rearview mirror.

And coming on just before that is the British series **Tales of the Unexpected**, which contains no fantasy I've seen, but often very grotesque irony that out-Hitchcocks Hitchcock.

PBS, acting on the theory that if it's British it must be educational, has given us the first American airings of **Blake's 7**, a British series from the late '70s. My initial reaction was, "Gee, this isn't as dumb as **Star Trek**, but it's more boring." A couple of episodes later I found it wasn't so boring.

Blake's 7 is purest adult comic-book, often hampered by cheap special effects. (As someone put it, the entire special effects budget would just about pay for the coffee breaks on **Star Trek**.) The plotting is occasionally inept, but it is light-years ahead of such other British shows as **Space: 1999** or **UFO**. In fact, there is nothing wrong with the basic premise at all--a noteworthy accomplishment in TV science fiction from any country. Whereas **Space: 1999** was hopeless from the outset, and on **Star Trek** one always wondered why they sent the captain and chief officers off into danger every time, the set-up in **Blake's 7** makes sense. The heroes are all outlawed freedom-fighters battling the evil Federation (which is run by the deliciously

butch villainess Servilan, played by Jacqueline Pearce). They have a leader, sort of, but are an anarchistic, mostly cynical lot who, quite unlike most TV characters, can make mistakes, lose or even get killed. The overall tone is quite bleak and despairing compared to the ever cheerful **Star Trek**. If you can forgive the fact that virtually every alien planet looks like coastal or rural England, and every futuristic installation looks like a 20th-century industrial plant, the show can be quite watchable, largely because the characterizations are subtle and interesting, and the mutability of the storyline allows for surprises. It's the essence of what I mean by adult comic book: real characters with believable emotions in a comic-book universe. Not half bad.

Let me confess, by the way, that I went to a **Blake's 7** convention, a one-day event in Philadelphia sponsored by a group called the British-American Television Appreciation Society or something like that. It's largely a **Doctor Who** fan group (and that's a show I can't sit through) so I doubt I'll be back, but it was fun. The two actors present, Paul Darrow (Avon) and Michael Keating (Vila) were witty and entertaining speakers. I was amused to note that a full-scale **Blake's 7** trekkie phenomenon is already in place, with fanzine fiction and even a large body of (mostly same-sex) **Blake's 7** pornography. It's probably a carryover from the people who do Kirk/Spock porno and now have something else to fantasize about. (God forbid they find out about that secret room in the Tardis where the Doctor ties up his beautiful assistants with long scarves and then . . .)

Of the new shows, **Twilight Zone** is far and away the best of the anthology series, consistently adult, literate and high-quality. This season started off with a very fine rendition of Theodore Sturgeon's "The Saucer of Lonliness" starring Shelley Duvall. (Script by David Gerrold.) But there are some changes, not all of them encouraging. Alan Brennert seems to have vanished from the credits. George R.R. Martin is now story editor and doing a fine job, but I can't help but wonder if Martin is intended as a caretaker editor, since the show has been cut down to

half an hour and stuck on Thursday nights at 8, up against **The Cosby Show**, which is the top-rated show on the tube. It looks to me like **Twilight Zone** is intended to die quietly. Let us at least hope for reruns. There isn't a single episode of the new **TZ** that isn't watchable, and some of them are among the finest fantasy programming ever.

Amazing Stories has firmly settled into a teen and pre-teen slot, and is often too juvenile for adult watching, although there's a nifty Halloween episode in which Christopher Lloyd (the mad scientist from **Back to the Future**) does a wonderful job of overacting as a tyrannical literature teacher who chases after naughty students even after they've accidentally killed, resurrected and decapitated him. This, too, is comic-book stuff, but on quite another level from **Star Trek IV**. It's juvenile comic-book stuff, which adults can glance at with some nostalgic amusement but hardly get involved in. I imagine if **Amazing** had come on in 1962, when I was 10, I would have thought it really neat.

Then there's **Tales from the Darkside**, with its cheap fright-effects. This isn't always a bad show, but the low budget and sometimes poor scripting do hurt. This past year there was a very funny episode (based on a Ron Goulart story) about a hack writer who makes necromantic sacrifices to further his career. Some of the others are terribly drawn-out and obvious, as for instance, "The Circus" (from a George Romero script) in which a nasty crusading reporter stumbles upon a sinister circus of human oddities, makes a fuss, threatens to expose all to the press-- and if you don't guess the ending in the first five minutes, you're assigned to watch **Saturday Night Dead** (or whatever your local bad horror film marathon is called) until you not only know the intimate details of **Plan 9 From Outer Space**, but the other eight plans as well.

Last and least, there is **Alf**, a cutesy alien who seems more closely related to Miss Piggy than to E.T. He dropped in on a typical American family. The result is typical TV sitcom. I saw the first episode. That was quite enough. □

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REVIEWS



books, etc.

MIRRORSHADES: THE CYBERPUNK ANTHOLOGY, edited by Bruce Sterling (Arbor House, 1986, 239 pp., \$16.95) (ISBN 0-87795-868-8)

With the publication of this anthology, the existence of the cyberpunk movement in science fiction becomes official. It is heralded in this volume by editor Bruce Sterling's brief but intense manifesto, which serves as a preface, and illustrated by 12 stories by 11 authors.

Cyberpunk is not a large movement--the 11 authors here include everyone writing even peripheral cyberpunk, and include several only mildly connected with the movement--but it is one that is easily identifiable and has produced some extremely memorable works. Some of the basic concepts which I believe have characterized the best cyberpunk visions include:

- 1) High technology will not remain the sole province of scientists indistinguishable from those of the 1950s and 1960s, and instead electronic data accessibility will allow intelligent individuals to attain extremely technical training without going through homogenizing educational institutions.
- 2) Rapid advances in computer and biological sciences could lead to a rapid changes in society's current belief in the sanctity of the human mind and body in its current form.
- 3) Rapid advances in data processing, communications and transportation technology could logically lead to a cosmopolitan future society where national governments and multinational corporations vie equally for power and control.
- 4) Mass communication could lead to a world-culture other than homogeneous middle-American society, specifically one where individuality is expressed primarily by joining with millions of others to form look-alike, think-alike cults.

These are some of the many visions introduced or better developed in 1980s SF which I believe will have a lasting effect on the thinking in the field.

The stories Sterling has chosen represent a wide range--possibly too wide. Rudy Rucker's "Tales of Houdini" is absurdist

surrealism; Greg Bear's "Petra" appears to be a far-future SF/fantasy with more in common with Gene Wolfe's "Book of the New Sun" than cyberpunk; and Lewis Shiner (despite his clear identification with the movement) is represented with a good but rather traditional SF story, one which could be considered typical ANALOG material except for the inclusion of an unrestrained corporate scientist of questionable ethics. And the only solo William Gibson story is merely proto-cyberpunk, his first published story, "The Gernsback Continuum".

But other stories are included that are quintessential cyberpunk. Tom Maddox's "Snake Eyes" is fine cyberpunk in the Gibson mode. Marc Laidlaw's "400 Boys" is a cyberpunk extravaganza (with the emphasis on the punk), using a viewpoint character who makes it hard to tell whether this is SF or fantasy. James Patrick Kelly's "Solstice," is a soft-core cyberpunk story, and a fine piece of SF writing. John Shirley is represented by a long independent excerpt from his Eclipse trilogy, "Freezone," which may be the most visually powerful and starkly cyberpunk work in the anthology. Paul Di Filippo contributes a very well written story, although one whose central concept is a bit of a hoary cliché. The final two stories are collaborations between Sterling and two others. "Red Star, Winter Orbit" is an excellent and original story which merges the strengths of both Sterling and

Gibson, and "Mozart in Mirrorshades" (with Lewis Shiner) is equally original, if in a lighter vein.

I happen to prefer a bit more cyber in my cyberpunk than we have here, but I will not cavil. Sterling and his compatriots have launched a movement which will forever expand the visionary scope of science fiction.

- Doug Fratz

THE HERCULES TEXT by Jack McDevitt (Ace Books, 1986, 307 pp., \$3.50) (ISBN 0-441-37367-4)

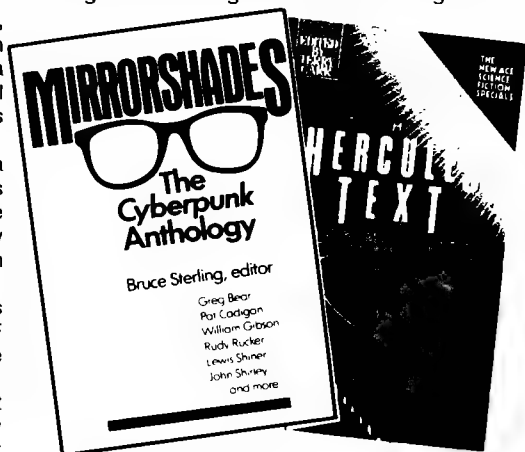
The Hercules Text, a first contact novel, is an Ace Science Fiction Special, and as such, stands in the shadow of a distinguished lineage. McDevitt's first novel must invariably be compared with Carl Sagan's recent **Contact**, and ultimately, with such works as Gunn's **The Listeners** and Hoyle and Elliot's **A For Andromeda**. Terry Carr's first three SF Specials debuted the novels of Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard and William Gibson, who may very well be the most important SF writers of the eighties. The later specials were somewhat weaker, but this novel is the first special after a long lull. In effect, it launches a new line, occupying the same position that Robinson's **The Wild Shore** did in 1984.

The Hercules Text bears this scrutiny well. The novel is told mainly through the eyes of a bureaucrat, Harry Carmichael. This in itself is an accomplishment, though Harry is a bureaucrat highly sympathetic with scientific concerns. As a personnel specialist for the Hercules Project, Harry's routine is thrown askew when this SETI research team discovers a variation in the pulse pattern of a pulsar. It soon becomes clear that this is a code, the Hercules Text, transmitted by an extraterrestrial intelligence.

Inveterate SF readers may approach a first contact novel with certain expectations. In this case, once the pulsar irregularity is detected, one expects a final culmination at the end of the novel, an actual, physical contact with the senders--permeated by that proverbial sense of wonder. Though McDevitt makes it clear that such contact is impossible, and that he will eschew any authorial contrivances to make it possible, the idea persists. But just as Budrys' **Rogue Moon** is not about the secret of the alien construct, this novel is not about that science-fictional question, "What will they be like?" What it is about is stated clearly in the book's title: the Hercules Text, or more accurately, the effects of the Hercules Text on the fragile power structures of our world.

Among the information encoded in the Hercules Text are the secret of the Big Bang, and more "practically," the means to achieve immortality and an effective ballistic missile defense. The existence of the text itself, in the sole possession of the U.S., brings the world to the brink of nuclear destruction. It is Harry, a man of two worlds, who must resolve the classic conflict between scientific idealism and bureaucracy. McDevitt's Hobbesian theme is clear: The truth will not set us free, not until we are ready to accept it. It all ends optimistically, though, with hope for a rational future and a bit of quasi-Stapledonian philosophy.

McDevitt's narration is perfectly suited to the purposes of his well-executed novel. His



tone is detached and journalistic; his style, tailored and precise. One wonders if McDevitt could have written a first contact novel à la **Contact**: There is a dearth of Campbellian plume in his prose.

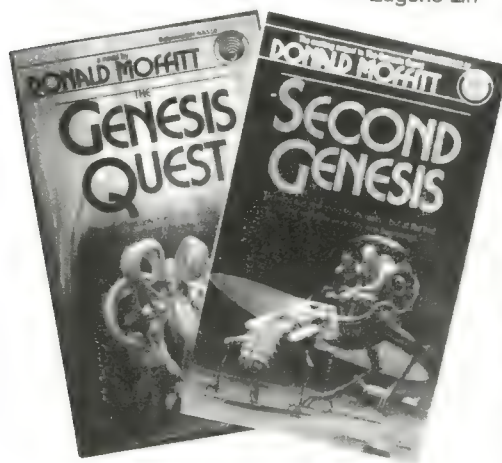
Harry's personal crises (which are similar to Macon's in Anne Tyler's **The Accidental Tourist**) parallel the problems the text engenders in the world, setting the stage for sharp characterizations. This may be a personal quirk, but Harry's actions at the end of the novel struck me as being incredibly pretentious and hypocritical, though McDevitt clearly did not intend them as such.

Never blatantly didactic, McDevitt's skill in scientific exposition approaches Benford's. He also possesses Benford's ability to accurately portray scientific culture. Indeed, this ability extends further--his sociological understanding of the structures of contemporary society and their interrelationships is impressive. McDevitt's treatment of religion's reaction to scientific discoveries may be the best since James Blish's.

Without squabbling about what persuasion of writer may or may not be included in SF's new generation, it is clear that McDevitt has earned a place in their ranks with his debut novel--if he had not already done so with his short stories. It is by no means a ground-breaking work, but a solid extrapolation of classic themes.

Terry Carr states in the introduction that "we can expect to see further specials every few months in the future." If these future specials are of the same quality as this one, SF's already large pool of talented, young writers should swell.

- Eugene Lin



GENESIS QUEST by Donald Moffit (Del Rey, 1986, 341 pp., \$3.50) (ISBN 0-345-32474-9)
SECOND GENESIS by Donald Moffit (Del Rey, 1987, \$3.50)

This is the '80s, the era of the Post-Moderns, when science fiction is once again making its bid for literary and critical parity with the rest of literature. We're all supposed to be reading and discussing only those books filled with thought and import, books that demand to be taken seriously. But sometimes, you just want to turn your back on serious fiction, close the blinds, lock the door, and read a novel that is pure fun.

Donald Moffit published a book in 1977 called **The Jupiter Theft**. It was a simply written tale of a prolonged encounter between

the first manned NASA Jupiter expedition and a group of sophisticated aliens who had arrived to take the entire planet Jupiter home with them. That novel was a refreshing delight, a cornucopia of gosh-wow speculations in a wide number of scientific disciplines, including xenobiology, astronomy, chemistry, linguistics and ballistics. The characterization was minimal to functional, the story was mostly travelogue, and the prose simplistic, although sturdy and professional. But the sheer audacity and profusion of the speculations! This was a book to be gobbled down like a viewing of **Aliens**: As long as the dialog and acting aren't actively obnoxious, who needs genuine drama when there are all these pretty pictures to look at?

During a previous period of agonized literary ambition, the New Wave years of the '60s, we had Larry Niven to supply us with our dose of "Jeez, will ya look at that sucker!" But lately Niven seems to be regressing to the point where his books are becoming unreadable regardless of the conceptual artistry. Now, after a long fallow period, Donald Moffit has returned with a big fat book, broken into two by his publisher. His conceptual daring has, if anything, become even more extreme.

The Genesis books begin 40 or so million years in the future. A quite advanced human race has built a huge transmitter and sent a message into intergalactic space, a message that includes all of human culture, and complete DNA maps for most of earth's flora and fauna, including people. This message is intercepted by a race known as the Nar, who they look something like two starfish joined at the middle. The Nar, who rely heavily on biotechnology, decode the message, and recreate humanity.

The first book begins many years later. There is a colony of 20 to 30,000 humans, living with the Nar in a benevolent cultural symbiosis. Original Man is presumed to be long gone, as it has taken the message 37 million years to arrive at the Nar's planet. The first volume tells of rising human discontent, followed by a small rebellion. The colony of humans convince the Nar that they are tired of being pets, however benevolent and respectful their masters. They are given a gigantic tree several hundred miles around, to be used as a starship. The second volume tells of a hair-raising swing around the binary black hole in the center of the Nar's galaxy, and the relativistic flight back to the Milky Way, and a travelogue of the stupendous artifacts left behind by the long-vanished Original Man.

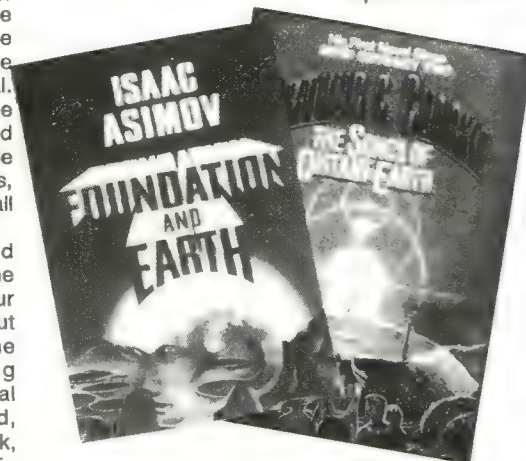
Along the way, Moffit hits the reader with one mind-stretcher after another. The meticulously described discs as big as planetary orbits used as the transmitter of the original message dwarf Niven's Ringworld. The Nar civilization and language is one of the finest and most complete creations of an alien species in SF. The structure and dynamics of the starship-tree--running with an idea from Freeman Dyson, apparently--are a tour de force in biological conceptualization. And there are many more. Moffit gives the impression of giving the reader something new to think about in virtually every known scientific discipline.

Tired of waiting for Gibson to finish his next book? Impatient with the sweating and straining of other writers to inlay currently

fashionable SF techniques onto their strained, humorless novels? Try a Moffit.

The '80s has found its Niven, an unashamed world-buster. Now, if only Del Rey Books can convince Mr. Moffit to write these things a little more frequently.

- Stephen P. Brown



FOUNDATION AND EARTH by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, 1986, 356 pp., \$16.95) (ISBN 0-385-23312-4) **THE SONGS OF DISTANT EARTH** by Arthur C. Clarke (Del Rey, 1986, 240 pp., \$17.95; Science Fiction Book Club) (ISBN 0-345-33219-9)

Last year once again saw new novels by two of science fiction's aging but prolific deans, Asimov and Clarke. And although both authors are working at the top of their form, the combination of age and massive popularity has led to some self-indulgences, as it has with so many of our aging stars (Heinlein being, of course, the crowning example).

Foundation and Earth is the fifth book in the Foundation series, and in fact is (more specifically) the second half of the fourth, **Foundation's Edge**. It is also, to a lesser degree, a sequel to **Robots and Empire**; Asimov has now cleverly unified his Foundation and robot stories into a complex, cohesive future history.

After an utterly embarrassing beginning, where Asimov has his lead characters sit down for several pages and tell each other everything we need to know about what has gone before, Asimov performs his usual narrative magic in writing an engaging story composed almost totally of dialog between his three main characters or internal monologs in the mind of his main character, and very little action. The plot concerns Trevor Trevise's search for the legendary Earth, accompanied by his faithful friend Janov Pelorat and Bliss, a female representative of the planetary-mind, Gaia. Trevise's goal is to find evidence that he is correct in his intuitive decision that the best future for mankind lies in the formation of a Galactic collective mind (Galaxia) based on Gaia's example.

Asimov is at his weakest when he strays from the realm of pure logic and reasoning into the murky realms of emotion and intuition. Trevise's intuitive decision that Galaxia is mankind's best future and Gaia's fixation on the correctness of his intuition, for instance, never quite attains believability. But I believe this is an important book for a reason that I have yet to see noted: this novel is Asimov's

attempt at rationalizing (in fictional form) a leftist, collectivist, contra-libertarian viewpoint, in opposition to the rightist, individualist viewpoint that has become so standard in SF. Asimov has strained to provide rational justification as to why mankind's best future may lie in sacrificing individuality, and was (at least marginally) successful.

Arthur C. Clarke's *The Songs of Distant Earth* also represents a conscious attempt, in this case to chart the possible course of humanity's future if none of the standard SF super-technology happens to materialize, and mankind learns that the Sun will last only 1500 more years. Clarke remains a master of traditional SF sense of wonder, and this novel is no exception, as the story of mankind's slow push to the stars unfolds, molded by Arthur Clarke's deep love for and confidence in humanity.

Clarke's novel, like Asimov's, is not without annoying flaws. Clarke has indulged himself in many ways: his 35th Century characters are illogically obsessed to the point of nostalgia with the history and people from the 20th Century and earlier, and far too often he has characters mouth clever comments which are all too obviously Clarke's own 20th Century views. We have a fundamental failure of vision in this book; Clarke characterizes 35th Century humans (both from Earth and a colony planet isolated for many centuries) as little different from highly educated 20th Century man (i.e. Arthur Clarke). This novel would have been more believable if set just a few hundred years in the future, instead of nearly 2000.

But if you are willing and able to believe that humans will think and act like you and I many centuries into the future, both of these novels can be enjoyed as SF in the classic mode.

- Doug Fratz

A HIDDEN PLACE by Robert Charles Wilson (Bantam, 1986, 212 pp., \$2.95) (ISBN 0-553-26103-7)

The intertwining of the mythical world of Faerie with our world is not an uncommon theme, particularly in British fiction. In his elegant first novel, Robert Charles Wilson uses this theme and that of alien visitation to create a work with a distinctly American flavor. This novel could have been many other things-- the alien visitor theme, as those in the mass media know, is easily exploited, and "mythopoeic" possibilities are evident. Instead, the visitors from the world of Faerie are merely background, focusing our attention on Wilson's evocative human drama.

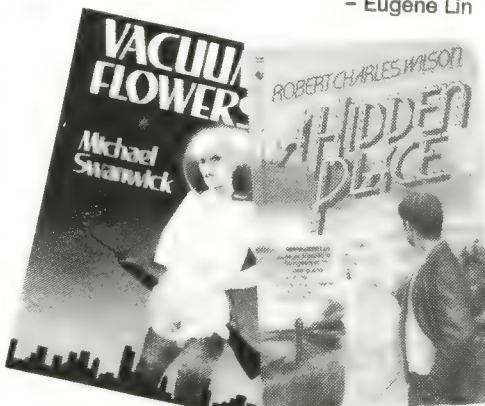
The alien visitors in this novel are actually two aspects of a single being, split in the passage from its world (only one of a number of interconnected worlds) to ours. One aspect is a hobo; the other, a strangely beautiful woman. They arrive in separate places in America during the Depression. Misfits themselves in our world, they must reunite in order to return to theirs. They are aided in their quest by two other misfits, Travis Fisher and Nancy Wilcox. The alien visitor came to our world to seek wisdom, but it is Travis and Nancy who reach true self-revelations.

Michael Bishop compares Wilson to "Sturgeon at his very best," and justifiably so.

Wilson finds the hope in the fringe elements of American society, the intimations of counterculture, that Sturgeon did. His general tone is, in many respects, remarkably similar to Sturgeon's.

A Hidden Place is, quite simply, an experience, luminous and striking. Wilson's prose can be both quietly lyrical and hard-edged. It is unfortunate that many other works (including Sturgeon's) to which we might ascribe these terms are characterized by another term: sentimentality. Wilson's portrayal of Depression-era small towns is notable for its naturalistic feel; he does for towns what Nelson Algren and James Farrell did for cities of this period. He avoids sentimentality where it is most likely to be found, for example, in his portrayal of hobo life. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Wilson's Haute Montagne evinces what is brutal and hypocritical in human nature, but with an ultimate affirmation of human values.

- Eugene Lin



VACUUM FLOWERS by Michael Swanwick (Arbor House, 1987, 248 pp., \$15.95) (ISBN 0-87795-870-X)

Michael Swanwick is a writer with a tremendous potential. He turned in a series of novellas in the late '70s and early '80s that were state-of-the-art SF. His first "novel," *In the Drift*, a 1985 Ace Special, suffered from the portmanteau effect of grafting together novellas into a single work. It veered from brilliant to embarrassing. Then he turned in a lengthy essay to ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF MAGAZINE on the subject of the group of writers currently labeled "cyberpunks" that was overly simplistic, and has become something of an anathema to those writers and their fans.

Something has happened to Michael Swanwick.

Here we have his first true novel, arriving on the scene with the pomp accorded a major effort: it is an Arbor House hardback, and it was serialized in ASIMOV'S, that magazine's second novel serialization ever (after William Gibson's *Count Zero*). The book is, it gives me great pain to relate, a hopeless mess.

Vacuum Flowers is set on a variety of L-5ish orbiting habitats of various degrees of high- and low-tech: fancy habitats for rich people and slum habitats for poor people. Earth is now a single hive mind, and those in orbit are the last bastions of individual human consciousness. Immediately the reader can witness the wholesale mining of the work of John Varley, as well as Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*. A love story is at the core of the novel, but it is heavily stacked against the

reader. The woman wakes up on the first page with her mind wiped and replaced by that of a commercial persona known as "Rebel." Rebel is a one-note performer of derring-do intended as the entertainment equivalent of Clint Eastwood movies, with the attendant lack of depth and any real humanity. Her boyfriend happens (for no real reason) to have four quite different minds, which seem to mainly manifest themselves as funny speech patterns. With the novel's protagonist spending most of the book as a cipher, and her love interest as a freak-show oddity, their love affair has all the heartfelt depth of an Archie comic.

The book is filled with a bewildering profusion of unassimilated technological marvels, such as the flowers of the title, which are some kind of space barnacle that grows on the surface of the habitats and must be cleaned off periodically. Where these things came from (terrestrial, extra-terrestrial or designed?) is never explained. It is merely a nice image that Swanwick throws in. Most of the book's "wonders" are akin to the flowers, fancy images with no grounding in anything real or germane.

The plot, such as it is, primarily consists of Rebel wandering around being chased by mean ol' corporate hitpeople, at least in the book's first half. The corporations seem to recede into the background in the second half, leaving Rebel with no particular reason to run, but run she does anyway. It all ends in a habitat heading off on a 50-year voyage to a nearby star, in an SF cliché that has always set my teeth on edge. Rebel and her boyfriend are heading off for a "great adventure" exploring the cosmos. What they are actually doing is confining themselves in this habitat for the rest of their natural lives, while the cosmos barely changes outside.

The book is riddled with imagery lifted from William Gibson, such as "retrofitting" and, in particular, the constant misuse of "wetware" on almost every page.

Swanwick seems to have left his own, often powerful voice behind, and written a steaming heap of prose filled with buzzwords from Varley, Sterling and Gibson.

I wanted to like this book very much. I truly believe that Swanwick is a potential major talent in the field. But slowly, slowly as I progressed through the book, I became aware that Swanwick has been seduced by fashion at the expense of his own superb voice. What has resulted is a shallow, pointless novel filled with unassimilated objects, people and landscapes.

- Stephen P. Brown

FIRE SANCTUARY by Katherine Eliska Kimbriel (Popular Library/Questar, 1986, 370 pp., \$3.50) (ISBN 0-445-20275-0)

For an unusual mixture of science fiction and imaginative creativity, this is interesting reading. Even though this is Kimbriel's first novel, it tackles difficult subjects and concepts, and it makes them work.

Nuala, a world seared by inherent radiation, was settled by human beings who arrived accidentally and had to adapt or die. Two groups now populate Nuala, one who considers itself fully human, and one, called the sinis, made up of irradiated humans so "hot" that they cannot deal directly with

humans not treated to resist their radioactivity.

The story takes place at a time when Nuala's long-functioning system is under attack by conspirators. There are several protagonists, including an off-worlder charged with safeguarding his friend the heir apparent, an alien woman fleeing from a terrible past,

and Braan, who comes to his inheritance amid death and destruction, yet managed to keep faith with his traditions and ideals.

While complex (sometimes to the point of confusion), the plot is a gripping one, the world depicted is well conceived and minutely

detailed, and the alien-like humans are intelligently approached.

Such a successful attempt, using a complicated and intriguing concept, suggests that Kimbriel's future work may well be even more gratifying.

— Ardath Mayhar

BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS by Frank Miller, with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley (Warner Books/DC Comics, 1986, 77 pp., \$12.95) (ISBN 0-446-38505-0)

Reviewed by Mark J. McGarry

Two-thirds of the way through Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*, a shadowed figure muses, "You were the one they used against us, Bruce. The one who played it rough. When the noise started from the parents' groups and the sub-committee called us in for questioning, you were the one who laughed. That scary laugh of yours. 'Sure we're criminals,' you said. 'We've always been criminals. We have to be criminals.'"

The bitter, reflective figure is a Man of Steel we have never seen before, an American secret weapon fighting Soviet troops under cover of darkness in a banana republic called Corto Maltese. The object of his recriminations is a criminal, a madman, a vigilante: Bruce Wayne, the Batman.

Yes, this is a comic book, if a vision so dark and fully realized can be called "comic," and if the term applied to 75-cent pamphlets of newsprint and garish ink can describe equally well a \$13 square-bound graphic novel (also available in a \$20 hardbound edition and in the original series of four magazines, which originally sold for \$2.95 each and have skyrocketed in value since their release earlier this year).

Miller, the 30-year-old artist/writer who in the late '70s and early '80s revised and revived a minor comic book hero known as Daredevil and made that title into a best seller, and who later committed the overtly experimental *Ronin* deluxe comic series, has now turned his attention to an American icon, a hero who first appeared in a crudely drawn adventure 47 years ago, and who has been on a downhill slide for most of the decades since.

The Dark Knight Returns, in any of its manifestations, is a publishing phenomenon. Sales of the original four-part series were double what was expected. The hardcover version is unique. The paperbound graphic novel, while not an unprecedented event, surpasses all predecessors in sheer size and quality of production.

The story is equally phenomenal, a science fiction/crime novel told in comic book format, one which is breathtakingly original because it stands the traditions and clichés of comic book storytelling on their heads by treating them with relentless realism.

Bruce Wayne's Gotham is any large city in 10 or 20 years: everything is the same, but worse. The streets are darker, more crowded. Criminal gangs run wild. Newscasters blandly read the body-count: "Woman explodes in subway station. Film at 11." Politicians—

including an unnamed but excruciatingly satirized Ronald Reagan—are mediagenic but ineffectual. The world stands a bit closer to the brink of nuclear armageddon.

It is a world that needs heroes, but doesn't want them. "Every year they grow smaller," Superman thinks about humanity in his internal monolog that runs through *Dark Knight*. "Every year they hate us more. We must not remind them that giants walk the earth."

Superman is the president's reluctant secret agent, a patriot who is less admirable post-Grenada than he was post-World War II. Bruce Wayne is a gray-haired, 49-year-old millionaire, thickening around the middle, who, as *Dark Knight* opens, hung up his cape and cowl a decade before and is now looking for a "good death."

Miller asks the essential questions, the ones which are, of necessity, glossed over in most comic books. Is there a place for super heroes in the same world occupied by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Parents' Music Resource Center? The answer is no, of course.

Given that, what kind of nut dresses up in a costume and goes out at night to bash armed criminals, malicious thugs and murderous psychopaths?

The answer is a man of principle, but one so driven as to be certifiably whacko. Miller portrays Bruce Wayne as a man so compelled by a personal demon thirsting for justice that he becomes a costumed vigilante—and who, after 10 years of a comparatively normal existence, finds that demon reawakened by the world's steepening slide into chaos and lawlessness. Wayne throws himself into the night again, harnessing his dark side, recapturing his lost youth—and spurring in the reader the feeling that his youth, too, has been renewed.

But because Miller asks the essential questions, the picture remains dark. Batman's return spurs a wave of vigilantism. The Joker, locked in the Arkham Home for the Emotionally Troubled and stirred from near-catatonia by the sight of his old nemesis, stages a comeback of his own. But this "clown prince of crime" is a chilling mass murderer whose weapons are dolls packed with explosives or poison gas.

Before he is through, Miller has chronicled a new Robin, who happens to be a 13-year-old girl; a limited nuclear war; a fight to the death between Superman and Batman; and the promise—or at least the hope—of a better world.

The Batman who careens through the pages of *Dark Knight* is more akin to the original, 1939 version than to the various incarnations who followed. Certainly this caped crusader is poles apart from that of the TV series starring Adam West, which has

lingered in the public perception longer than reason or justice should allow.

This Batman dangles a kidnapper from the side of a building to extract information from him, throws "Batarangs" honed to razor sharpness and drives a 60-ton "Batmobile" that mows down street gangs with "Rubber bullets. Honest." But he still has a code against killing, and when he's not telling Robin to "pick that lock like I taught you," he admonishes her to sit up straight.

Miller's art work is fully the equal of his story. His pencil drawings, inked by Klaus Janson and colored by Lynn Varley, are raw and muscular, at times verging on caricature but no less effective for that. His Batman is massive, looming, while Superman is a splash of color against the darkness.

All comic books are cinematic, but Miller's use of cinematic effects is inventive without being flashy. He wields the fast cutaway, the extreme closeup and well-choreographed battle scenes to better effect than any of his peers.

Miller leavens his apocalyptic story line with doses of humor and nostalgia. His rendition of a sharp-tongued Alfred, the butler, is hilarious; his characterization of the new Robin as a Valley girl looking for a purpose is a master stroke that engenders laughter and compassion.

The references to the past of the *Dark Knight*--and to that of the comic book reader--are bittersweet. In a few lines, Miller hints at the fate of the other superheroes, and of two earlier versions of the Boy Wonder Woman costume. Green Arrow, the archer, has one arm and a stump "that still hurts when it's cold."

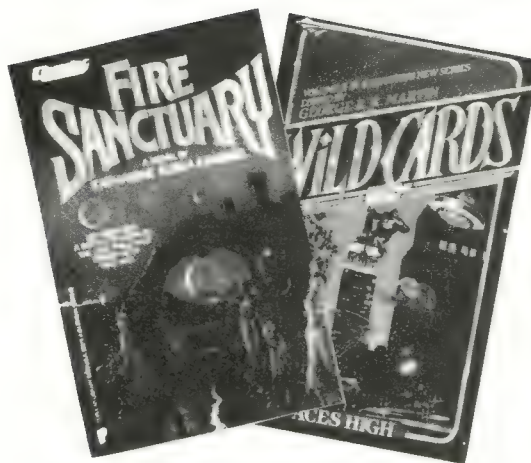
These asides may be lost on someone who has fallen out of touch with the four-color world, but they are poignant interludes for the long-time comic book reader. They instill a quiet grief at the passing of people and places which never existed.

The Dark Knight Returns is unquestionably a work of genius, a serious work from an artist who takes comic books seriously.

But it is, after all, a comic book. It is hard to imagine someone eschewing a night with Proust--or even Stephen King--to curl up with Miller's novel. But if any of those devotees of Proust or King spent even one afternoon in Gotham City as a child, they will find themselves rewarded by *The Dark Knight Returns*. For those of us who still have a stack of *Detective Comics* in our closets, no such endorsement is needed, or sufficient.

"I'm a man of 30, of 20 again," Batman thinks on the night of his return. "The rain on my chest is a baptism. I'm born again."

We who feared the comics would not grow with us know exactly how he feels. □



WILD CARDS I, edited by George R.R. Martin (Bantam, 1987, 410 pp., \$3.95) (ISBN 0-553-26190-8) **WILD CARDS II**, edited by George R.R. Martin (Bantam, 1987, \$3.95)

A few years ago many of the sf writers in the Southwest (particularly New Mexico and Texas) became obsessed by a role-playing game that outgrew itself. The one great speculation that fueled their obsession was: What if comic-book-style super-heros actually existed? Under the able and always professional eye of Martin, the fiction which grew out of this game gradually achieved cohesion and internal logic. Soon they became books, and the first two of several Wild Card books has appeared.

Martin and his fellow imagineers have recreated the past 40 years of history based on the existence of super-heroes-- called Aces--created as the result of an alien genetic plague. The background is rich and highly detailed, some of the characters are remarkable, some mundane, and some, well, not very good at all.

The first book lacks narrative drive, but it could be excused on the grounds that it is an introductory volume. The best story in the book is "Thirty Minutes Over Broadway" by the amazing Howard Waldrop, an underappreciated writer who is truly one of sf's treasures. This story tells of the death of Jetboy and the release of the plague that created the Aces and the Jokers (those unfortunates who didn't develop Ace powers, but ended up as twisted genetic misfits). Other notable stories are Roger Zelazny's "The Sleeper," which delineates an Ace whose powers change every time he wakes up, thus causing him to resist sleep, turning him into an agonized speedfreak; Martin's own "Shell Games," involving the Great and Powerful Turtle, a character who has raised agorophobia to an art form; Lewis Shiner's "The Long, Dark Night of Fortunato," which sets up a character who can wield his powers only under an intense sexual stimulus.

There are multitudes of other characters, major and minor, woven together into a whole that one hopes will cohere several more books down the line. Editor Martin's "Interludes," Dos Passos-mode fragments of news articles, interviews, quotes from imaginary books, etc., add a great deal to the cohesion process, and during some of the weaker stories give the reader something to look forward to.

It is a fascinating project, and one that bears watching as future books roll off

Bantam's presses. But there are some disquieting tendencies. The project's genesis in a role-playing game is stamped on every page. The situations have that carefully controlled list of available options at every plot turn that indicate a game, rather than a work of fiction. The various failed attempts at turning Dungeons & Dragons scenarios into fantasy novels demonstrate the flaw in this kind of plotting. Also, in an attempt at creating adult fiction, working against the inherently juvenile situation, the writers have liberally added doses of graphic sex and street scenes of gutter degradation--not a bad thing in itself, but these scenes tend to glare in contrast to the basic scenario. Sex, drugs and ghetto life do not, by themselves, make adult fiction, especially when juxtaposed with the inherent silliness of super-heroes. But the sheer size and complexity of the world of the Aces compels. There is endless invention going on here, the product of some of sf's finest writers working out an obsession.

The second book does little to allay fears. There are attempts at setting up large-scale crises for the Aces to fix, such as an asteroid-sized being bent on the domination of humanity. There is also a lot of exposition about the race that released the virus in the first place. But with all the effort being expended, the two books lack a center. There is no sense of a single overall story. The project seems fragmented and episodic. Sheer invention, dazzling as it often is, does not disguise the lack of a central story.

One infuriating tendency is for some of the most interesting events to happen offstage. The first year after the release of the virus was a time of terrifying chaos as thousands died and the remainder were transformed in various frightening ways. This whole period is offstage, as is most of the last 40 years. The writers made the decision to quickly bring the scenario up to the late '80s, and bypassed their most fertile vein of story.

But there are many fine writers at work on the Wild Card books. In addition to those previously mentioned, there are Ed Bryant, Victor Milan, Walter Jon Williams, Melinda Snodgrass, and Stephen Leigh. George Alec Effinger is scheduled to appear in a future volume. Despite what must have been heroic editorial efforts on the behalf of Martin, the Wild Card writers were Balkanized, each lost in their own small piece of turf, each involved in their own character. The lack of a grand unifying theme has made what could have been an interesting experiment into an oddity for future footnoters.

This project is overshadowed by an unfortunate coincidence. DC Comics is (as I write) midway through the release of a 12 issue comic book series, **The Watchmen**, which tackles the same basic question that started the Wild Card project: real super-heros. But **The Watchmen** is a true work of gritty adult realism, told with brilliant economy, with none of the gaming scenario plotting that characterizes Wild Cards, and with characters that truly deal with the potential reality of their abilities. Humans at the start, all of the Watchmen crack and break down in different ways under the incredible responsibility of their powers. This series is the product of one writer, Alan Moore, and possibly that has a lot to do with it. Very few works of collaboration, particularly with a

dozen or more writers involved, come across with the kind of seamless cohesion that a single vision can instill.

— Stephen P. Brown

STAR OF GYPSIES by Robert Silverberg (Donald I. Fine, 1986, \$19.95)

The green wagons of the Gypsies are legend: they have been used as symbols of an ideal (by Thomas Mann in "Tonio Kroger"), or to add vivid historical color (by Tim Powers in **The Anubis Gates**). But let us say that these fabled wanderers hail from a distant Romany Star, that they are the last remnants of an advanced civilization destroyed by the swelling of its sun. Forced to flee to Earth, the Gypsies meet great adversity: Atlantis is their first city, and after its destruction, they must live as a wandering, persecuted minority. This is the thesis for what the jacket blurb bills as "Robert Silverberg's most ambitious work to date."

The lot of the Gypsies is considerably better at the time of the novel, the year 3159. Because of their ability as explorers, the Gypsies were integral in the drive to colonize the galaxy. Now they occupy an important but precarious position in the politics of humankind. Their alien origins are kept secret, as is their ability to "ghost" (mentally travel through time and space). Foremost in their cultural memories is the yearning to return to Romany Star. The memoirs of Yakoub, King of the Gypsies, constitute the whole of the book--the tale of a life that epitomizes the fortunes and spirit of his people.

Somewhat ritualistic in its telling, the novel begins with Yakoub in a self-imposed, solitary exile on Mulano--the tranquil, gelid brightness of this world serving as a reflective counterpoint to the turmoil in the rest of the galaxy. Yakoub had abdicated his throne to galvanize his people into actively striving for Romany Star. As he bides his time, his son seizes the throne, forcing Yakoub into action.

This is all done with the variegation and grace typical of the second and third stages of Silverberg's career, but the novel is surely not his most ambitious work. It lacks the epic sweep and adventure characteristic of post-"retirement" Silverberg. Yakoub's stay on Mulano is one of contemplation, though not reaching the depth of introspection of **Dying Inside**. The action picks up as Yakoub struggles to regain his throne, but the novel is not particularly well-plotted, as Silverberg novels go. The ghosting destroys some of the narrative tension. Silverberg's tendency to use extravagant metaphors without accompanying emotive depth is more evident here than in his other novels.

Yet the novel is strangely compelling. It works. Yakoub is a wry, stubborn, quizzical old rogue with true wisdom--a remarkable character done with sincerity and insight. **Star of the Gypsies** may also be one of the most uplifting works in the genre. In the throes of existential depression, Yakoub asserts, "Let us live as though there is purpose, and go through each day joyously and with vigor, doing the task that is our task." This maxim is resonant in all Yakoub's actions.

Silverberg's fascination with Gypsy culture
 ***** cont. on page 34

Counter-Thrusts



Send all letters of comment to Thrust Publications, 8217 Langport Terrace, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20877. All letters published earn one free issue. Deadline for letters to appear in issue 27: April 15, 1987.

Alan Dean Foster
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In his fine review of *Brazil*, Darrell mentions a scene in which a "character is engulfed in stray newspapers." It should be mentioned that the director's intent is rather more serious than that. The man so engulfed is the "Robin Hood-like free-lance" repairman whom Darrell alludes to earlier. Having avoided and outwitted the omnipotent government up to this point, director Terry Gilliam shows him finally smothered by the actual oppressive paperwork that dominates his futuristic society. When the hero of the film fights to rip away the murderous paper, he finds nothing underneath. This is because the whole sequence is part of the frenetic last few minutes of the film, which in turn is taking place in the mind of the hero as he retreats into catatonia while being subjected to official torture administered by his best friend. The repairman is played by none other than Robert de Niro, by the way.

Among other scenes that will stick in your memory for a long time are Bob Hoskins' wonderful performance as a Central Services repairman out to get the hero; the Robert Schuller-like funeral for the hero's mother's best friend, who has been reduced to goo and bones by repeated failed attempts at cosmetic surgery; a chorus of burly, brutal security guards rehearsing Christmas carols; the government's chief torturer washing blood off his hands before playing with his young daughter; endless rows of clerks working identical tasks at identical desks (a scene ripped off for a current Dr Pepper commercial); and, most delightfully, Gilliam's throw-away, wicked little parody of the Odessa steps massacre from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, in which Gilliam uses a vacuum cleaner as a stand-in for the runaway baby carriage.

Darrell is Very Right. Everyone should see this movie.

Robert Silverberg
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I read THRUST 25 with pleasure and interest. But I don't have much to say in response to John Shirley's piece, which seems pretty much free of significant content. I can only repeat what I told him: that the lesser cyberpunk writers have reduced Gibson's innovations of style and material to formula in just a matter of months, and that I am innately suspicious of Movements in writing. Since I was the editor who bought Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*, and since a laudatory comment from me is prominently featured on the cover of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, I can hardly be deemed hostile to cyberpunk in any blanket way. But when a bunch of stylistic mannerisms, a chip-on-the-shoulder kind of adolescent condescension, and a cluster of already overfamiliar high-tech images are offered to me as the latest revolutionary means by which science fiction will reform society, the best I can manage is a yawn and a smile. I've heard it all before. So did the readers of the manifestos of the Futurians and the Technocrats in the years before I was on the scene. John will be yawning and smiling about it all himself, in another five or ten years--or perhaps sooner, since the epochs are much shorter nowadays.

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My compliments on THRUST 25, a fine issue. Intelligent words from Bishop on Bradbury, Vonnegut & Sagan; Marvin brooding but literate, as always. On John Shirley's "Make it Scream," I was amused at his Jeremiad toward Bob Silverberg as one of the pusillanimous Establishment. Established he is, but if memory serves, wasn't Silverberg one of the "New Wave" some 20 years ago? Fast-forwarding our imagination, we can see that length of time hence when some new Young Turk fires off a sizzler at that old fart Shirley, still clinging to his cyberpoop ideas, and shrilling, "Cowardice!" Mes amis--the more things change, the more they stay the same, and this too shall pass. Shall we plod quietly on?

Gregory Benford
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I was amused by John Shirley's column, mostly because he seems to think the most

important aspect of cyberpunk is precisely what bores me with it. Mind, I do like a lot of cyberpunk writing, especially Gibson's style and Sterling's imagination (plus homework) and Rucker's madness. The hype and overreaching wears a bit, though.

But does John seriously think we just "don't know what is going on" and haven't noticed that corporations are getting big and powerful? I cited Pohl and Kornbluth, but in quoting that, John left out the concluding phrase "... and they were funny." I could've cited Marx, you know. This isn't the stuff of daring imagination John thinks it is. The layers of cultural nuance argument doesn't wash, either. "The street makes its own uses for things," straight from Toffler's *The Third Wave*, is simply a description of how technological societies have been retrofitting and adapting for a long time. The more complex the tech gets, the most fascinating the interlocking net. Great. I'm all for describing that. But ... revolutionary? I published a story about virus computer programs in 1970; it's a little difficult to get excited about the latest twist in systems lore now. Similarly, I liked Sterling's speculations in *Schismatrix* on O'Neill colony eco-collapse ... but I've read the NASA studies on this that came before that, so I'm scarcely amazed.

Still, I do respond to John's declarations about trying to do something about the problems he sees described in the pages of the LOS ANGELES TIMES. Good stuff. Oppression? Join Amnesty International, as I have. Corporate greed? Join Greenpeace, as I did. Join the Cousteau Society, or write a novel about the death of the oceans (*Timescape*, 1980).

It feels fine being angry about these things, but I got tired of just that ...

On a more serious note, I was struck by Mike Bishop's piece. I disagree that "ignorant neglect" led to these novels not being nominated for Nebulas or Hugos in 1985. I think they weren't very impressive.

I reviewed *Galapagos* for the LA TIMES and, sorry, Vonnegut's deck-stacking just didn't work for me. His methods leached all suspense from the story and his mannerisms simply didn't have the heft of *Slaughterhouse Five* and his other fine works. The book was tired.

Similarly, I reviewed *Cosmos* for the NY TIMES and found it derivative, wooden, bloated. Its big payoff at the galactic center was a *Star Trek* device (aliens appear as remembered loved ones). The discovery of a code in pi was simply unconvincing. (If you look that many places along in pi, you can find any message you like. Incidentally, Frank Drake told me he suggested this ending after reading the Sagan ms., which simply stopped two chapters before the present ending). I suspect many SFWA members read the books and simply didn't think they came trailing clouds of glory.

There is justice in Mike's contention that the awards reward "being one of the gang." I don't maintain that all books on the ballot are beauties. But the non-presence of LeGuin, for example, is because many perceive her as in steady decline as a thinker and writer. I came to think of her latest work as *Always Going On*, because it was so puffed up, unenergetic and uninspected a set of pat ideas. I think much of what he says about

the awards is true, but he picked the wrong subset of novels to prove it. I imagine he's now thinking *The Handmaid's Tale* is another example of heavy-duty deepthink with stylish telling . . . but I don't agree. The best work is still being written largely by unsung writers inside the field . . . such as himself.

JOHN SHIRLEY REPLIES:

Cyberpunk is just a signpost. It indicates a direction, but it doesn't really explain, in and of itself, what you're going to see along the way.

Nothing is completely original. When the New Wave movement happened in SF, a lot of people said, "This is nothing. Bester (or this or that writer) already did this. The rest of literature already did it so we don't need to." But they did need to: To recognize the movement and declare space for it, to give it room to move and breathe. It changed some things, and the field is more flexible and mature for it.

The important thing about cyberpunk, ultimately, is what it foreshadows. You can pick it apart all you want, but that doesn't change the impact or import of the movement. People are responding to more than just new clothes on old SF. They are excited because we've made landfall. We can leave the insular vehicle of SF, and go out into the new world of technological and cultural revolution. And we can let the world come in. We can really get our hands dirty. Cyberpunk, you see, signals the breaking down of barriers between SF and the happening cultural world.

Benford's remark about Sterling having been anticipated by some NASA study strikes me as wildly irrelevant. What has a NASA study got to do with the course of SF literature, except as research material? I never said cyberpunk was saying things that hadn't been said anywhere--I said that it was saying things that hadn't been gone into in SF, for the most part . . . not with this unique synthesis of hyper-contemporary input and hip perspective. (In a way cyberpunk is important because it borrows so much.)

Also, cyberpunk is simply written for a younger crowd--or at least a hipper one--than Benford's. Like I said, it's a tribal thing, and Benford can say what he likes, but he obviously just doesn't get it. It's like when surrealism came along, some art critics said, "So what? This is nothing new. We've had symbolic painting for centuries. Bosch, Breughel . . . images of dreams from Goya . . ." But it was something new. They just didn't get it.

I will say though that Benford's contribution to the better of modern SF, in the past and now, is well recognized by anyone with good taste. Benford's work mattered, and his current work continues to matter.

Paul Cook
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THRUST seems to have a genuine interest and respect for the authors and ideas within the SF and fantasy field. It doesn't seem to be mean-spirited in its reviews the way many other journals seem to be. Most journals--including the biggies--seem to be put together by failed SF writers who want to

destroy everyone in the field, if only to make themselves look good. You don't have that aura about yourselves. (I'd say that even if you gave my books bad reviews. There is enough acrimony in the field as it is; we just don't need any more name-calling or brow-beating).

Keep up the good work.

Kim Gibbs
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I enjoyed your recent article on the John W. Campbell Award in the summer issue of THRUST [24]. At the time I had a number of corrections for you regarding first publications dates, but since I was in the process of moving then, I never got around to sending them. Jeffrey Kasten's letter in the latest THRUST [25] reminded me of them, so here they are. First, several of the writers you mentioned appeared previous to 1971, and therefore were unable to receive the Campbell award. The big surprise might be Greg Bear, whose first appearance was back in the Winter 1967 issue of FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION ("Destroyers"). Bear was, I believe, only 16 years old at the time. Two writers who had even earlier appearances but may not be surprising considering their ages are Donald Kingsbury, who first appeared in the June 1952 issue of ASTOUNDING ("The Ghost Town") and Hilbert Schenck, who appeared in the April 1953 issue of F&SF ("Tomorrow's Weather"). Connie Willis also had an early appearance back in the Winter 1970 issue of WORLDS OF FANTASY ("Santa Titicaca"). Finally, your puzzlement regarding Vonda McIntyre not being nominated is easily explained by her 1970 appearance in the February issue of VENTURE ("Breaking Point"). She also published her early work as V.N. McIntyre. Secondly, two of the writers mentioned in your column, while still eligible for the Campbell award, had earlier appearances which hurt their chances for a nomination. Octavia Butler's first appearance was in the 1971 anthology CLARION published by Signet ("Crossover"). Marta Randall's first story is rather obscure. Her first story ("Smack Run") was published in NEW WORLDS #5 published by Sphere Books in England in 1973. This issue of NEW WORLDS was never published in the United States; the issue #5 that was published by Avon was a reprint of the English #6. What makes the story even more obscure is that the story was published under Randall's then married name, Marta Bergstresser. Finally, I don't believe that Somtow Sucharitkul's appearance in UNEARTH affected his Campbell nomination (or Gibson's later lack of nomination), since UNEARTH was considered a non-professional market similar to SPACE AND TIME.

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Since reading the Shirley article in your last issue, I have seen other attacks on cyberpunk besides the ones Mr. Shirley mentioned. Because of these unwarranted attacks, I feel I

must express my solidarity with cyberpunk writers. They work in a powerful and exciting new literary genre; I enjoy reading it, and from all indications, I am going to enjoy writing it. Writers are attracted to such energetic fictional styles, not driven away by the excesses of critics. To judge from the marketplace, readers feel the same way. I support the cyberpunk movement, for it adds to the creative possibilities inherent in science fiction. It adds to the choices available to writers. Cyberpunk should be praised for this, not criticized.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson
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If not for John Shirley's piece, the issue would be rather tame, even dull. I hope you'll run more hard-edged, opinionated articles by folks who know what they are talking about or who are at least interesting enough to be worth arguing with. Until World Fantasy Con this past week, I might have questioned John's assertion that there is a backlash against the so-called cyberpunk writers. Everyone I know thinks this stuff is rather spiffy. But at the convention, there was a special party for cyberpreps, supposed to be a funny idea. I couldn't figure out the joke, and what is more, allowing that it might be a funny pun in a bar conversation, that it would become the obsessive joke of a con was beyond comprehension. When numbers of people tell the same bad joke over and over again, when patently there is no humor involved, there has to be another reason. And John's piece gives me that reason: Some people want so badly to trivialize or dismiss the worthiness of this biting form of science fiction, that even a dull joke takes on great meaning for them. I should mention, however, that the people spreading this cyberprep joke throughout the convention, and who I saw milling outside the cyberprep party, were themselves dullards, and nobody who is writing interestingly participated in the banality of this convention-long jest.

Piers seems to think SFWA ignores his works because of some animosity dating back to 1977, but the fact is, for the majority of the members, THRUST will be the first reference we've ever seen to this 10-year-old falling out. SFWA has grown tremendously in 10 years; it is no longer a small organization. The majority of the membership is now quite young and/or quite new to the field. There is no conspiracy to pass along information about some 1977 spat. I'm sure he's right that some older members are holding grudges. But they're not calling up younger members to inform us of their grudges, and the grudge-holders have zero impact on the Nebula nomination process. If Piers wants to know why really he isn't nominated, I think I can tell him. Most of the members don't read much. They select their reading matter according to what is currently "hip," so they're picking up on Gibson and Bear at the moment, afraid they'll otherwise be left out of the talk. A sheep mentality is at work there. The common perception, too, is that Piers writes for a very young audience and riddles his stories with puns; you'll almost never find young-adult F/SF on the Nebula

recommendations. If Madeleine L'Engle writes a new SF novel, it won't be nominated either. None of these dynamics have a thing to do with whatever may have gone down between Piers and SFWA a decade past. The current membership has largely no inkling of SFWA's history, and there's absolutely nobody filling them in.

If Janrae Frank really intended to suggest my writing and opinions glorify only women who swing swords, I can say only that she hasn't read anything of mine and is unqualified to speak either about my writings or my opinions. If she wishes to editorialize about the joys of being one of Achmed Abdullah's traditional women, she can do that without reference to me, puhhleeze! I invite everyone to check Achmed's nifty antique novels out the library and see just how thrilling his stories can be; but you won't find many well-drawn women in them. He was fond of sentimental goody-two-shoes passive heroines, with a sprinkling of repulsive selfish bitches who get their just desserts, usually by dying. As for me, at least one of my novels is about mystic passivity in the Taoist sense: **Ou Lu Khen and the Beautiful Madwoman**. Anyway, Amazon fantasies are the current fad--begun, obviously enough, by my anthologies--but we're in no danger of losing stories that glorify less rambunctious women. Indeed not. (Anyone who quotes Anne Morrow Lindbergh for a feminine philosophy may be of course be jesting, I suppose, since the radical conservatism of her Christian viewpoint goes beyond reactionary.)

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I suppose the Charles Platt column is as inevitable as acne is to adolescents. I was very amused to see that I haunt Charles' nightmares, for all my Nightmare Self seems to hold opinions quite contrary to my own. (I am all in favor of hardcovers--at least my Waking Self is.) But I assume that this column is just a warmup, because here we have over a thousand words by Charles Platt and he hasn't made any new enemies yet.

Come, come Charles. I expect a better performance than that.

Michael Bishop is right that the SF "club" tends to neglect outside figures. I suspect this is more a matter of sheer neglect than active prejudice. SF pros, particularly, are notorious for not keeping up with the field. If something is to be a serious contender for a Nebula, it has to be promoted as one. Contrary to what Mike says, publication late in the year will hamper chances. A Nebula candidate has to hit the campaign trail early. This is all part of a publishing strategy. A Nebula candidate should be published in the spring, maybe about March, sent out to the major SF review journals, then (especially if a paperback is available) to the membership, or--I don't know if this is actually done--to short list of the most active Nebula recommenders. Anybody with access to the Nebula reports and a SFWA Directory could compile such a mailing list. Award-winning is an exact science.

As for the four books in question--LeGuin's, Sagan's, Bradbury's, Vonnegut's--I think they all lost out for extra-literary reasons. None were sent around to the membership. **Always Coming Home** was badly overpriced. Bradbury's was widely perceived a mystery. (Though Mike is right: Bradbury's short fiction, which is clearly

SF/fantasy, and appearing at the rate of two or three stories a year, is consistently ignored.) Only Vonnegut, I suspect, is a victim of spite. There is still a lot of resentment over Vonnegut's cynical marketing strategy of becoming a bestseller by denying that he writes SF. It was a sound strategy in the early '60s when "literary" mainstream was a bigger field than SF, but today it's probably unnecessary. Yet Vonnegut is still paying the price. He will never, never win a science fiction award. If he goes out of fashion with the SeriLit crowd, he may pay twice over, by suffering oblivion, since, for something to be reprinted as an SF classic, it has to be recognized as SF. Vonnegut could go the way of Richard Brautigan, while his SF contemporaries--Pohl, Dick, Sheckley, Kornbluth, etc.--are reprinted as classics.

None of this has anything to do with quality. What we need is the occasional reprint series, like the Gregg Press series or the Avon Rediscoveries, which can go back and reissue worthy and neglected works, even those by "outside" writers.

For example, **Time After Time** by Allen Appel, which I review in this issue, hasn't got a chance for a Nebula. Nobody knows who the writer is. The book has not been promoted as SF, much yet as a Nebula candidate. It only came to my attention because the editor of a newspaper assigned me to read it, and I took the assignment because I am always interested in discovering "unknown" books like this. I don't think it's the best SF book of the year, but it's better than many in-genre books that get nominated for awards.

To John Shirley I might suggest that the perceived hostility toward cyberpunk is more

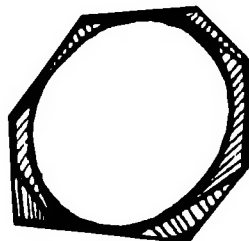
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a matter of cynicism. I personally admire Gibson's work (and much of Shirley's), but when I read these pretentious manifestoes about how the New SF heralds the arrival of the Millennium, how, for the first time, we have serious, committed, writers who are taking the future seriously ("Until now, standard SF played with the future as kind of a bright toy . . ."), well, it becomes very hard

to take it all seriously. We've heard all this before. It wasn't true in the New Wave Era and it isn't true now. This sort of self-proclamation is inherently useless. Anyone who wants to change SF need only write stories so overwhelming that they will indeed change the direction of the field. If the stories are not capable of doing that, then no amount of proclamations or manifestoes will help. □

REVIEWS (cont. from pg. 30)

is evident and welcome. The reader is immersed in the Rom experience. In the end, we stand up and cheer the Gypsies' triumphant ascendancy; after all the Gaje humans get what their foolishness warrants.

— Eugene Lin

THE OUTCAST by Louise Cooper (Tor, 1986, 316 pp., \$2.95) (ISBN 0-812-53394-1)

The *Outcast* is the second installment of Cooper's "Time Master Trilogy," an epic set in a time and place where there is no balance between the powers of Order and Chaos; a story that shows that whichever force tips the balance, the result is equally harmful.

The previous volume, *The Initiate*, showed a world totally controlled by the forces of Light and Order. The powers of Chaos were thought to have been permanently banished, until the incredible powers of one of the Adepts of the Circle, Tarod, were found to have their source in Chaos. Tarod was sentenced to death by the other Adepts, whom he had thought to be his closest friends. In an effort to escape the execution, Tarod literally stops time, throwing the Castle and everyone in it except himself into a timeless limbo.

The *Outcast* begins here. No one has heard a word from the Castle in months, and no one could get inside. Cyllan, a peasant girl with natural psychic powers, and Drachea Rannak, Heir Margrave of Shu Province, were caught in a Warp, a strange and terrifying storm, and deposited in the Castle.

Cyllan falls in love with Tarod, and will stop at nothing to protect him from the forces of Light. Drachea has just the opposite intentions: He is set on seeing both Tarod and Cyllan killed, and the Circle of Adepts brought back from the timeless limbo.

Drachea succeeds in blackmailing Tarod to set time right by holding Cyllan hostage and threatening to kill her. But once time had been set straight and the Circle of Adepts released from their limbo, could Tarod succeed in saving his own life and that of Cyllan's, or must he sacrifice himself to save the woman he loves?

The *Outcast* is exciting reading both on an action level as well as the intellectual/metaphysical level. Cooper effectively shows that "good" and "evil" are relative concepts, not necessarily attributed to forces of Order and Chaos. She proves through an emotionally moving story that balance between all of these concepts is imperative. Cooper's "Time Master Trilogy," at least the first two installments thereof, is nothing less than superb.

— Debra L. McBride

BUCK GODOT: ZAP GUN FOR HIRE, VOL. 1, by Phil Foglio, (Starblaze (Donning), 1986, 72 pp., \$7.95) (ISBN 0-89865-365-7)

This is more "What If" science fiction, the question this time being "What if Raymond Chandler and Douglas Adams had collaborated on Flash Gordon, and then serialized it in, say, MAD MAGAZINE?"

The book begins with a prolog outlining history since the 20th century. Order is now maintained by Law Machines, tentatively rated as the fourth most powerful beings in existence. (Humanity is a mere 12th.) They propound and enforce 21 basic laws, the first of which is "Interference, Obstruction, Attempted or Actual Destruction of a Law Machine is Prohibited." The succeeding laws are enacted one at a time, at the discretion of a planet's inhabitants and the Law Machines. Due to a technician's contrivance, however, a planet called New Hong Kong is exempt from all laws.

We are thereupon introduced to Asteroid Alvin's Bar and Grill, a tavern in New Hong Kong and the particular haunt of Buck Godot, a mercenary who looks something like Hagar the Horrible and something like Alex Karras. A violent, sarcastic loner who walks the mean streets in search of his next drink (preferably an ion blaster), he manages in the first six pages to destroy most of the bar while protecting a shapely thief from the priests of Slag Blah.

Later, he acts as bodyguard to an exceedingly affectionate (and thereby prosperous) entertainer known as Sizzlin' Sue. He then helps Asteroid Al pick up a shipment of Super-Cooled Mega-Joy Juice and runs afoul of the Pistol-Packin' Polaris Packrat and his Loquacious Lasers, Smith and Wesson. Finally, in an epic which takes up more than half the book, he faces down his old employers, tackles a class 8 power from another dimension, saves an entire planet's population, and takes up flower arranging. (You had to be there.)

If you want philosophy, go elsewhere. But if you prefer untrammelled space opera, this is your meat. It abounds with great creations: the Planetary Temperance League (which has listed Buck as a lost soul), the Kooblens, and the Lady Known as Lou. The humor comes in all brow heights, and Phil Foglio is especially good at throwaway humor, those jokes you miss until the second or third reading.

Starblaze intends this as a series and had promised volume 2 for November. Space opera fans, used to waiting three years between Star Wars movies will not mind waiting for Godot.

— Dan Crawford □

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